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**CROSSCURRENTS** *Modern Critiques*  
Harry T. Moore, *General Editor*

# Henry Miller AND THE CRITICS

EDITED BY *George Wickes*

WITH A PREFACE BY *Harry T. Moore*

Carbondale

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## P R E F A C E

WHEN THE NAME of the Henry Miller who is the subject of this book began to be heard in the 1930s, a good many people thought of the actor who had starred in *The Devil's Disciple* and *The Great Divide*. But wasn't he dead? (Yes, 1926.) Before long, however, the Henry Miller from the 14th Ward, Brooklyn, had given the world such a shaking that he became the Henry Miller people thought of, and the other one was reduced to a minor rôle in American theatrical history.

Our first acquaintance with the writing Miller came to some of us in Peter Neagoe's anthology, *Americans Abroad*, printed in Holland in 1932. Miller's contribution was a story "Mademoiselle Claude," concerning a fille de joie who was to turn up in his subsequent work. In the style of *Americans Abroad*, the author's picture, bibliography, and biography preceded his contribution. The photograph of Miller showed a man nearly bald, wearing glasses with heavy black rims, through which he stared out impassively at the photographer. His bibliography read:

Written three books, none of which accepted thus far.  
Also about a hundred short stories, some of which appeared in various American magazines. Last book, a novel, will be published anonymously.

This record was unimpressive compared with those of other contributors to *Americans Abroad*, who included Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, Ezra Pound, e. e. cummings, Conrad Aiken, and Gertrude Stein. There were also some younger writers marked out for significant careers—Kay Boyle and James T. Farrell for example—as well as such seasoned members of the rive-gauche set as Samuel Putnam, Caresse Crosby, Wambly Bald, and Eugene Jolas. Yet Miller's “last book, a novel, [which] will be published anonymously,” was destined to make literary history, for certainly this was *Tropic of Cancer*, which was soon published under Miller's name.

His biographical sketch for *Americans Abroad* read:

Born N. Y. City, 1891. No schooling. Was tailor, personnel manager in large corporation, ranch-man in California, newspaper man, hobo and wanderer. Was a 6-day bike racer, a concert pianist, and in my spare time I practice saint-hood. Came to Paris to study vice.

Miller has said that this sketch caused him embarrassment for some years because people took it seriously and continually asked if he really went to Paris to study vice. Of course the statement is now recognizable as vintage Miller.

Not long after *Americans Abroad*, word began to circulate about Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and, a bit later, about *Black Spring*, then *Tropic of Capricorn*. Those of us who on trips to France formerly brought back *Ulysses* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, wrapped in sports shirts, now stashed Miller's books away in our luggage (a practice I continued after the war and as late as 1960). These volumes were of course paperbacks; I took some of the early ones to a binder in the 1930s and, when he returned them bound, he asked the question that was so often to be asked in relation

to Henry Miller's work: "Hey, where can I get copies of these books?"

They are now all gradually becoming available in America, thanks to James Laughlin, who has published many of them across the years under the aegis of New Directions, and thanks to Barney Rosset, whose Grove Press has brought out the *Tropic* books and *Black Spring*. These last have incited some court actions which have been costly to Grove Press although they have, like all attempts at suppression, certainly increased the sales of the books.

George Wickes, in the present fine volume of memoirs and criticism of Miller, includes transcriptions from one of the most notable of these cases, the "trial" of *Tropic of Cancer* in Boston in 1961. Mr. Wickes includes part of the testimony and cross-examination of Mark Schorer and Harry Levin; he omits mine because I am represented elsewhere in the book with an essay on Miller, and in any event what I was asked and what I answered went pretty much along the line of the Schorer and Levin questions and answers. But I can add a bit of background which may help put into context some of the material recorded here.

The opening session was scheduled for Monday morning, September 25. But at that time we were told that Judge Daugherty, who was to preside, had been taken ill and that the opening would be postponed until Tuesday, with Judge Goldberg on the bench. His name, without the Knights-of-Columbus ring of Judge Daugherty's, seemed a good augury. But it wasn't: Judge Lewis Goldberg already had a full docket and resented being dragged into the Miller case. A naturally jolly little man, he became rather snappish, especially toward the Grove Press's lawyer, Ephraim London, a notable figure in civil-liberties and freedom-to-read cases. The action against the book had been

brought by the Massachusetts Attorney General, Edward J. McCormack, Jr., who was represented in court by the Assistant Attorney General, Leo Sontag. Mr. Sontag's questions were biting, but he didn't browbeat witnesses, and his manner was friendly enough.

The Boston papers played up the case; the Herald ran such headlines as: "*'TROPIC OF CANCER'* SEX DIDOES DEFENDED." There was of course a good deal of dialectical hairsplitting, with the Judge and the Assistant Attorney General continually trying to reduce the witnesses' answers to a yes-or-no simplification of the kind college professors don't indulge in. Since I was trying to catch a train, I wanted the proceedings to get on, but felt that much of the material needed elaboration. After all, literary criticism is an alien subject in a courtroom. Several times Judge Goldberg told me I would miss my train, and once he told me that I wasn't giving a lecture of the kind that couldn't be interrupted because it was being delivered in the classroom. "Yes, your Honor," I said, "I'm the Judge there"—so the record shows.

Mr. Wickes's "1961 and After" section in the present book tells the results of the case, and I'll let him report them. But of course there is much more to his volume than accounts of this court action. The reminiscences he includes usually attest what those of us who have known Henry Miller have always observed, that he is a genial man who is both a good listener and a brilliant talker. For memoirs, Mr. Wickes has drawn upon such old friends of Miller's as his biographer, Alfred Perlès, and his early admirer, Lawrence Durrell. Mr. Wickes has further included reminiscences by the U.C.L.A. Director of Libraries, Lawrence Clark Powell, and by a California neighbor of Miller's, Walker Winslow. There are also articles by critics who early recognized the value of Miller's work: Herbert Read,

George Orwell, and Edmund Wilson. And if Mr. Wickes has included my New York Times Book Review greeting of the American publication of *Tropic of Cancer*, he has balanced this by putting in Stanley Kauffmann's less enthusiastic New Republic review of that Grove Press edition. Mr. Wickes has also collected other memoirs, critical articles, or general statements by Samuel Putnam, Walter Lowenfels, Frederick J. Hoffman, Blaise Cendrars, Herbert J. Muller, Philip Rahv, Kenneth Rexroth, Kingsley Widmer, Aldous Huxley, Elmer Gertz, and Miller himself. It is hard to imagine how Mr. Wickes, who conducted the Paris Review interview with Miller and edited the Miller-Durrell correspondence, could have put together a more richly various or generally valuable anthology dealing with this author.

While working on its preface I have been rereading Mr. Wickes's book in proofsheets which have to accompany the typescript of the preface to the publishers'. These proofsheets are fastened to a strip of cardboard which has a huge "YES" painted on it in red letters. I'm not sure what it's there for, but agree with the sentiment, for this is a book about a writer who, however cynical and nihilistic he may seem at times, is ultimately affirmative.

HARRY T. MOORE

May 11, 1963



## A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

Henry Miller, Elmer Gertz, and Kingsley Widmer generously agreed to write essays for this volume. Aldous Huxley, Harry Levin, and Mark Schorer consented to the use of unpublished materials. Sir Herbert Read permitted two of his articles to be combined, and Les Éditions Denoël authorized the translation of Blaise Cendrars' review. Ansel Adams kindly contributed his portrait of Henry Miller, never before published. To all these this volume is offered, with warm thanks for their helpfulness and good will.

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## INTRODUCTION

*George Wickes*

THERE IS A RUMOR going around that Henry Miller has suffered from critical neglect in the English-speaking world. As this volume amply demonstrates, such is by no means the case. Miller has received a good deal of attention from serious critics, both English and American, over the past three decades. Now, it is true that he is held in higher esteem in half a dozen non-Anglo-Saxon countries and that we in America have only a dim notion of his international standing. Moreover, his reputation in this country, especially since the publication of the *Tropics*, has become hopelessly entangled in sociology. Henry Miller has become an issue, a controversy, a cause, as vehemently and irrationally defended as he is attacked.

The time has come for a balanced critical appraisal. After all, Henry Miller has been a significant figure on the American literary scene for almost thirty years now. The purpose of this book is to provide that appraisal by bringing together the opinions of responsible critics over the years. At the same time this book undertakes to give some account of Miller's biography, which is often inextricable from his writings. The essays are arranged in a chronological scheme designed to trace the course of his career and the progress of his reputation concurrently.

Miller's literary career falls naturally into two parts: the thirties in Paris, and the forties and fifties in America, chiefly in Big Sur. During the first period he produced his most original and distinctive work; since then he has continued prolific but has expanded the volume rather than the character of his work. Miller criticism can be conveniently divided into two corresponding periods, the first of discovery, the second of appraisal; each has a section in this volume. The third part of my collection, which deals with the publication in America of *Tropic of Cancer*, has more to do with Miller's impact on the American public than with literary criticism. The present period in Miller criticism is best viewed with historical detachment. For the moment we have a great deal of nonsense and special pleading in the daily press, but in the long run the conclusions of the sixties may prove the most significant.

Harvey Mudd College  
September 15, 1962

1930-1940

## HENRY MILLER IN PARIS

THE FIRST FOUR PIECES in my collection attempt to give some sense of those early years in Paris when Miller was struggling to find himself as a writer. Only one of these pieces was written at the time, and that was not published until thirty years later. But three of the writers knew Miller well in the early thirties; in fact all three appear, slightly disguised, as characters in Miller's writings. Alfred Perlès was Miller's great friend in Paris. His account of Miller's arrival in 1930 makes the best beginning to this collection, just as the biography from which this chapter is taken provides the best portrait of its subject. *My Friend Henry Miller*, written at Big Sur with Miller as its Muse, is a warm, lively reminiscence of their bohemian life together. Walter Lowenfels, a poet, was a member of the same group of Montparnasse artists and intellectuals as Henry Miller. His reaction to the manuscript of *Tropic of Cancer* in 1931 recaptures the immediacy of that work in progress. Lowenfels' notes, first published in *Kulchur* in 1961, will be incorporated into a chapter on Henry Miller in his forthcoming autobiography.

Another American expatriate, Samuel Putnam, scholar, translator, and editor, first published Henry Miller in *The New Review* in 1932. Years later, in his "Memoirs of a Lost and Found Generation," as he subtitled *Paris Was Our Mistress*, he had a higher opinion of Miller than at the time; but then, his earlier views may have been tempered by his annoyance with Miller and Perlès who once transformed, in the words of Alfred Perlès, "Putnam's tedious highbrow review into a lively and readable magazine," scrapping the contents and substituting their own mixture of jabberwocky and pornography. Unfortunately Putnam, who was away in New York at the time,

found out before the issue appeared in print. Some idea of the contents, however, can be gathered from *The Booster* magazine. Perlès had been editing this most *arrière-garde* house organ of the American Country Club of France when the president of the club decided to give up the magazine and allowed his editor to take it over. Frederick J. Hoffman, who has also written illuminatingly on Miller in *Freudianism and the Literary Mind*, discusses Miller's career as an editor in *The Little Magazine*.

The next four pieces represent the critical reception that greeted Miller in the latter thirties. Blaise Cendrars' review, printed in *Orbes* in 1935 (now translated into English for the first time), was the first and most heartwarming accolade. Also in 1935 George Orwell reviewed *Tropic of Cancer* in *The New English Weekly*. No two men could have been further apart ideologically, but the following year, Orwell, on his way to Spain to cover the civil war, made a point of looking up Miller in Paris, and in subsequent years read his works as they appeared. His long essay, the title piece in a volume of criticism published in 1940, uses Miller as a touchstone to survey literature between the wars; only the first of three parts is here reprinted.

In America also Miller was attracting attention. In 1938, Edmund Wilson, in some ways Orwell's American counterpart, wrote an article on *Tropic of Cancer* for the *New Republic*, provoking a reply from Henry Miller in the process. In 1940, *Kenyon Review* published Herbert J. Muller's article, the first academic critic's assessment of Miller's work. Muller wrote at a time when only one of Henry Miller's books had been published in his native country, and that only the previous year.

MY FRIEND HENRY MILLER—  
PARIS, 1930

*Alfred Perlès*

HE HAD JUST DISEMBARKED in Paris on his second voyage from New York. He was sitting all by himself at a table at one of the Montparnasse cafés, treating himself to food and drinks; I was alarmed and fascinated by the huge pile of saucers in front of him. Although his ancestry was purely German, there was a pronounced Mongolian quality about him. His features in repose resembled those of a mandarin. He was nearing forty, and apart from a greying fringe like the halo of a saint, he was completely bald, his skull glistening like mica. His eyes, two almond-shaped slits, were definitely Chinese. He wore strong, horn-rimmed glasses through which his sea-green eyes pierced with benevolent malice and a sort of un-human kindliness. Lean and sinewy, he seemed above medium height; he walked with the springy, youthful step of Pan.

I sat down at his table and we began talking—or rather he talked and I listened. He talked through his hat, like an inspired lunatic, and again I was struck by the melodiousness of his voice, a voice that made one think of cathedral bells. He had come to Paris for good and he was going to write. He had had two years to think it over, and had finally decided to burn the bridges behind him and break with the past. It was impossible, he insisted, for a writer to fulfil himself

in America. In America the artist is ever an outcast, a pariah. Paris was the only place where an artist could remain an artist without losing his dignity. He was going to stay in Paris and learn French and become a Frenchman. And, above all, write! He was on the verge of finding his true self. The violence that had been accumulating through years of repression now clamoured for expression. He was not going to hold himself in any longer. He sensed an explosive force in himself, which, if released in America, would have been a dud. America had failed him. He had not only been starved but smothered with silence. In France, he was sure, it would be different.

I hinted that it was painful to starve anywhere and especially in France where food could be so delicious. To do all the things he wanted to do, a little money was necessary. He said laughingly that he was aware of the fact. He added that he had plenty of friends in the States who would send him a few dollars every now and then. There was Emil Schnellock, his old pal, who'd never let him down; Joe O'Regan also was always good for a touch. And June would be sending him money, too; she had stayed in New York and would be joining him later when he had found his bearings. France was a cheap country and with the franc at twenty-two to the dollar, he wouldn't be too miserable.

"Have you got any dollars?" I asked.

He laughed and said he hadn't. There was probably a letter with a ten-dollar bill waiting for him at the American Express. He'd go there first thing in the morning.

It turned out that he hadn't a cent in his pocket. The saucers with the price of each *consommation* marked on them were piling up at a terrific rate; Henry had continued to order more drinks, hoping thereby to

summon the necessary courage to admit to the *cafetier* that he was penniless. He showed me a watch which he had intended to leave with the café proprietor in lieu of payment. The watch didn't look so good to me, but he said it was a gold one. He was so obviously an American that the waiters evinced no sign of anxiety over the pile of saucers.

The café owner would naturally have declined to accept a token payment of this kind and would have handed him over without compunction to the ever-present *agent de police*, but I had already decided to forestall such a contingency. I bought him more food and more drinks and listened to his meanderings. He went into a long monologue about America, the poverty he had known there, his friends, the jobs he had had, the women he had slept with, his father's tailor shop where he was supposed to learn the trade and where instead he unwittingly established his first group of admirers (the illiterate immigrant personnel of the paternal shop) to whom he read his first writings, which happened to be lengthy disquisitions on Nietzsche, Petronius, Rabelais, *et alii*.

In the course of this first night we spent together he never stopped talking; he seemed bent on revealing the full story of his past. None of the incidents he related were particularly to his credit. His parents, for instance, loved him dearly and he had managed to be their despair—not by ingratitude or acts which the black sheep of a family might commit, but simply by being himself. The snatches he gave me of his childhood were significant. He had not been a child prodigy, nor even particularly precocious. One of his main characteristics, as far back as he could remember, was his utter disregard for *things*. Often when given a handsome present, for Christmas or his birthday (the two days almost coincided, for he was born

on Boxing Day), he would, after displaying the greatest joy over the gift, give it away to a comrade, sometimes the very day he received it. He gave away his toys with the same nonchalance and unattachment to things with which he later gave away his most precious belongings. He acted thus not so much out of goodness of heart but rather because things meant nothing to him—he wasn't attached to them. That things were of questionable value seems to have been the first important discovery he made as a child. Henry's father, an easy-going, generous, beer-drinking German, was of a nature to understand, and sympathize with, this attitude, but not his mother: she felt it must be a wicked child that relished giving everything away.

Then he went on about the friends he made as a child in the streets of his native Brooklyn, the games they played in the gutter, their fights and childish adventures. Henry had always had a talent for making friends. His sympathy, his enthusiasm and exuberance were infectious. Up to a point, that is. However much he gave of himself, there remained in him a hard core which was inviolate. Although he soon became the hero of the local dead-end kids, he never quite became a dead-end kid himself. He was aloof, curious and detached—detached to the point of treachery. His best friends, who were prepared to go through fire and water for him, weren't safe from his treachery—an odd streak of treachery that always stopped short of betrayal—which was in reality only the manifestation of a bizarre sense of humour. Henry treated his friends with great gentleness and affection, but he was not unaware of their deficiencies and idiosyncrasies. His sense of humour was such that it enabled him to laugh about everything and everybody, himself included—and laughter is a form of treachery.

Although superficially obedient as a child, Henry always went his own way. He picked his friends for

reasons of his own, and whether his parents approved of them or not was a matter of indifference to him. Why he chose certain boys as friends in preference to others whose friendship might have been more rewarding, it is impossible to say. In the choice of his friends he let himself be guided by instinct, curiosity and intuition rather than a sense of advantage. He often picked the wrong friends just as later he often picked the wrong women. But neither the "wrong" friends nor the "wrong" women were really *wrong* because they responded to certain hidden traits in himself which, ever since he began to write, he had tried to disentangle from the chaos of his soul.

As the only son he naturally was expected to take over his father's business, and for a while he did make an effort to fall in with his parents' wishes. It didn't work. To be a tailor just wasn't his line of country. He was too easy-going, too irresponsible, too full of odd nostalgias, to make a good tradesman. Not that he didn't get on well with the people in his father's shop. That was precisely the trouble—he got along too well with them. He was only interested in people, the business left him cold. He made friends with the cutters, the tailors, the errand boys, everybody he came in contact with. They all loved him. He made himself loved by doing nothing but give ear to their problems. Henry must already then have had this gift he never lost—the ability to listen to people. Not everyone can listen; it isn't enough to be attentive to what the other fellow says: you must be able to listen to what he doesn't say, to what he obscurely feels but is too inarticulate to couch in words. Henry was one man in a million who could do that. It is his greatest asset both as a writer and a human being: the talent to listen and to respond with silence or with words, as the case demands, but always with sympathy.

As a tailor he was a flop. His father took it philo-

sophically enough, but his mother was hurt. She wouldn't have minded so much if her son had chosen another profession and stayed at home. But Henry wasn't the stay-at-home kind. By the time he was eighteen, he was a full man with every experience behind him except, perhaps, marriage. He had a multitude of friends, each of whom he met on his own level. Though he hadn't yet begun to write, they sensed the artist in him. With some of them he maintained a voluminous correspondence long after they ceased to see one another. His great friend Emil Schnellock alone received several thousand letters from him over the years; some day, perhaps, this correspondence will find its way into print and throw an interesting light upon Henry's development. (See the Chapter "The Theatre" in *The Books in My Life* in which H. M. dwells on his early associations and their impact on him.)

Henry is the most gregarious person I ever encountered. He had need of people, not so much for friendship's sake but to use them up. They were his raw material which some day he would use in books which as yet he only dreamed of writing. Everything was raw material to him—his parents, his sister, the tailor shop, Brooklyn, his friends, the whores he slept with, the women he loved, the food he ate, the books he read, the music he listened to—they all would pervade the hallucinating pages of his books in good time. At present he was only accumulating material: people, things and events were slowly sinking to the floor of his memory, as water collects in a cistern. They were like the innumerable fragments of a kaleidoscope which had yet to be assembled.

Henry was flexible, accommodating and conciliatory, but could be ruthless when his essential being was in danger. In the course of our long talk that first evening,

on the terrace of the Dôme, I was frequently startled and shocked by the utter candour with which he described some of the more flagrant acts of betrayal and desertion, especially where women were concerned. For the reader who wishes to risk the experience, I would recommend the perusal of the two-volume work, *Sexus*, in which Miller has paraded all that is unmentionable in graphic, almost clinical, verbiage. (*Sexus*, published in French and English in Paris, has the distinction of having been suppressed, by court order, even in France. It is easily obtainable in Japan, where H. M. is widely read.)

Speaking of his past, Henry seemed to make himself blacker than he actually was. He always found excuses and extenuating circumstances for others, never for himself. One thing is certain: his actions may not always have been wise, but his sincerity was beyond doubt; whatever else he was, he was no hypocrite. He knew the difference between good and evil, and, being naturally good, did not have to probe his motives. Throughout the years of early manhood he made a valiant struggle to extricate the kernel of his essential being from the chaos in which he had enveloped himself.

Dawn was breaking over the *carrefour*. He was now deep in the story of his wanderings. He had been all over America, hitchhiking, begging, scrounging his way over the length and breadth of that enormous continent. He was an excellent raconteur, speaking in clipped, lively sentences that resuscitated the atmosphere of the experiences he had lived through. He seemed to have been forever broke, hungry and without a roof over his head, and had often spent the night on a park bench or in a local gaol. Sometimes he took a job as dishwasher or peddled vacuum cleaners or encyclopaedias. He never kept any job long. Wher-

ever he went people helped him along; they were often mere tramps, not much better off than himself. Now and then it was a woman who took him in for a night, or for a fortnight. By the time he returned to New York and married he was already a past master in the art of living by his wits.

There was a certain similarity between his past and mine which produced an almost instant sense of kinship. Having lived on my wits nearly all my life, I found it interesting to learn how life was lived in the "Land of Plenty." Though I was a few years his junior, I too, had held all sorts of jobs, mostly odd ones: turn by turn, I was a dishwasher, fortune-teller, pedlar, barman, sandwichman, ghost-writer, card-sharper, guinea-pig for quacks testing the effect of monkey glands, and so on and so forth. Like Henry, I had been destitute and hungry; like him, I had managed to survive. The situations he had to face I had had to face as well: we had developed the same desperado philosophy.

"Better keep that watch for a rainy day," I said, beckoning to the waiter.

At the time I was working on the Paris edition of the *Chicago Tribune* and could afford to indulge in an occasional fit of generosity. I paid the bill, bought Henry a toothbrush, gave him a shirt, and installed him at my hotel—Hôtel Central, 1 bis, rue du Maine—paying a week's rent in advance for him.

The stage was set for the *Tropic of Cancer*.

## HENRY MILLER IN MONTPARNASSE

*Samuel Putnam*

HENRY WAS MORE OR LESS an unknown quantity for us when he first arrived in Montparnasse. We knew that he was a proofreader on the Paris edition of the *Chicago Tribune*, that was about all. By reason of his hours, we saw him chiefly late at night or early in the morning. He would come in after the paper had gone to press and would invariably contrive to make an entrance of it, a broad ingenuous grin on his face and a somewhat timid twinkle behind his spectacles —spectacles which, so it was said, he was forever leaving behind him on the banks of the Seine, where for the sake of Hugo-esque color he frequently spent the night with the Parisian lower depths. We also came to know him from the vinous-streaked dawn at the Coupole; and here, when he felt that he had a properly appreciative audience, he would expound his *Weltanschauung*, principally in words of four letters. Briefly stated, it was to the effect that prostitutes are about the only pure beings to be found in a world of reeking garbage. Not a highly original conception; but provided his listeners had had a sufficient number of Pernods, he could lend it all the force of novelty. Once in a while, when the alcoholic fumes began to evaporate, someone would emerge from his trance and mutter:

"For Christ's sake, Hank, why don't you write a book? It ought to be a goddamned classic, or maybe even a best-seller."

To most of us, to all save a few intimates, Miller was not even a "type," but merely someone on the edge of things. Very few suspected that he was interested in writing, much less that he himself wrote. I gave him his first publication, with his "Madeleine Claude" story, in the third issue of the *New Review*. I published this contribution because I liked it as a piece of prose, but especially, because I felt that it was a good expression of Montparnasse life in that era and of a prevalent type of expatriate—the Henry Miller type. If Miller was atypical in any way, it was, perhaps, in the greater amount of interest, or more intelligent interest, that he exhibited in at least a certain phase of French life and in certain aspects of contemporary French writing. He associated more with the natives of the country than many Americans did, even though his interest appeared to be confined largely to prostitutes and other representatives of the demimonde. And he had heard of the Surrealists and was later to read, at my suggestion, Louis Ferdinand Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night*, the author and the book that may be said to have made him what he is today. (How well he understood Céline I have never been able to decide.)

There were, to be sure, other Americans who had a predilection for the *filles de joie*; the difference was that out of this milieu Henry was gradually to evolve a philosophy of life, if it may be called that, certainly an outlook on the world. There were, as I see it, two things that tended to crystallize the process for him: one was the company and influence of Alfred Perlès; the other was Céline. First Perlès and then Céline showed him how he might erect a literary point of view out of the life that he loved and lived, and thereby

provided him with a stock in trade. Henry had made the discovery that Gauguin did that morning when the latter awoke to exclaim "*Merde! Merde!* All is *merde!*" This point of view may be seen in an early stage of formulation in "*Mademoiselle Claude*" and in a later, more developed one in the *Tropic of Cancer*. In the interim, Miller had read his Céline.

I have spoken of Alfred Perlès, who was Miller's inseparable shadow; or was it the other way around? Perlès's name is now well known in England and America to readers of the very precious advance-guard publications, and even then he had his Montparnasse-blown legend. A part of it he once related to me, himself, when the mood was on him. A lieutenant, I believe it was, in the Austrian Army in the First World War, he was lying in wait for the enemy with his men. When the moment came, he was supposed to rise and give the signal to charge; but instead, he simply lay there, mentally paralyzed, unable to move. The result was that a non-com had to take over and Perlès was later court-martialed and saved only through the influence of his family. Such is the tale as he told it; it may be true or it may be apocryphal; he may have had another to tell the next time, to someone else. I should like to believe it, for it would explain Alfred rather neatly, and it might help to explain Henry Miller as well.

Like Miller, Perlès was an expounder of the Philosophy of Universal Filth; but unlike his friend, he had a wide European culture to draw upon, an equal facility of expression in three languages, and, what is more to the point, a certain sense of futile automatism that was the unmistakable mark and heritage of the young after-war generation. That he had a very great and direct influence upon Miller's thinking, no one who knew the pair could doubt.

I was back in America on a flying visit in the sum-

mer of 1931 when the number of the *New Review* with Miller's story appeared. At his request, I took a copy around to some of the publishers. I shall not forget the hauteur with which one young literary editor informed me: "I don't believe we care to publish Mr. Miller." Another said: "Whorehouse stuff." Another: "Plain pornography." Yet ten years later I was to pick up a literary review and find an article extolling Henry Miller as one of the great and neglected writers of our time, and the article was signed by the same individual who had been so haughty about "Mademoiselle Claude." Something had happened. It was not merely that Miller had matured his point of view and his style; that point of view had come to suit the temper of the times in those days of the great disillusionment, the later 'thirties; it suited the reaction that had set in against the mid-decade rush for the "proletarian" band-wagon.

We naturally were not aware that Henry was destined to become a writer who within a dozen years or so would be mentioned by the undergraduate in the same breath with Joyce, and who would even take it upon himself to try to dethrone the author of *Ulysses*. It is the old case of I knew him when. To us he was a good drinking companion, a nice guy to run into at Jimmy's or the Coupole or in those desolate shivering hours at the Dôme as we watched the dawn come creeping down the boulevard du Montparnasse to awaken M. Potin's grocer boys across the way and send the "artists" home to bed. We found him humorous, affable, generous, somewhat reserved with those who did not know him well, and with a certain timidity behind it all.

There was a rumor that once upon a time, back in America, Henry had gone around with a copy of Karl Marx under his arm; but there was certainly nothing to

show it now. His later writings indicate that he does not know the difference between a *prolétair* and a *lumpen-prolétair*. One of his pet aversions in those days—his and Perlès's—was Jimmy Farrell. That, in looking back, is not hard to understand. With opposing views of life, Farrell and Miller represented the two diverging paths which the more significant American writing of the turbulent depression-ridden 'thirties was to take. Meanwhile, whatever may be said of Miller, he has summed up for us as no one else has the expatriates' Paris of the second phase: and I think it may be said that the *Tropic of Cancer* is to that phase what *The Sun Also Rises* is to the preceding one.

A NOTE ON *TROPIC OF CANCER*—  
PARIS, 1931

*Walter Lowenfels*

MILLER'S THESIS is a knock-out. His book ought to be called, "I am the only man in the world that's alive." I've read the first fifty pages and nothing has impressed me so much in years. His armor is impeccable. He eats. He defecates. He fornicates. He has wet dreams. Naturally he copulates in the out-house. It's all simultaneous. He is alive. He was close to passing out there once about breakfasts. With those arranged, he is 100% there. I'm sure his book didn't get under way until his breakfasts were arranged. Then he was able to let loose on all fronts. It's the most destructive book I have ever read. It ought, for one thing, to stop a lot of books. It won't, but still . . . this is a real explosion. Any little flaws are splinters that go by the boards. It ought to make any writer or reader overhaul himself. A destruction like this helps to refine the world . . . Life going back to the raw. Tasteless, formless, pure humanless experience. Amoebic. It must be marvelous to be delicatessen in Miller's stomach, mixing with Zadkine's lunch, Fraenkel's breakfast and all the rest of the grave-yard exhalations.

It's not rigor mortis Miller wants. He's like the spider that paralyzes the bug with one bite in the

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cortex. Then the spider has motionless meat, on which she and the little ones can feast at leisure. That's the way everyone in the alive world of Miller's web is—alive enough not to go bad. Otherwise no one moves a muscle and the show goes on. Well perhaps it's worth dying for Miller's monologue. That is if one is male.

As for the poor girls! I never smelt anything more like garbage—huge female globs of it. How he hates them all, the vinegar of human kindness. The only ones he has a gentler feeling about are those he knows he can devour, and so he keeps alive by the kick of the dead he surrounds himself with. It's the periphery of the world. And so alive. No Lawrencian sterility here. It's far beyond that.

Miller's right too, I think, in stressing the Paris background. It supplies all the benefits of the Hoboken dumps. It's not often that a man like this meets a town like that. Or does it always happen? The right man kills the city at the exact moment of its death? Ten years earlier, with Stravinsky, Cocteau, Joyce, Picasso and so on still on the rise, and sur-realism to the fore, Miller might have cut his throat. But now!—It's dead meat for him. And he gloats on it. Feeds on its paralysis. While the inhabitants sicken on egophagy.

Nothing escapes here. This is the inside story of everyone. Everyone is an open book to Miller. It really makes so little difference in this world of the dead that there's no need to be too careful about it. So, for example, though you can read his low opinion of Wambly Bald, yet Bald's opinion of Fraenkel was all Miller needed, until by a stroke of luck he found Fraenkel quite different. And yet, knowing Bald, how could he help smelling a rat? Well, that's the chaos of it. There's really so little difference it isn't disconcerting. It fits into the scheme of this amazing book

where it is only necessary for everyone to be slightly paralyzed. It's enough to be dead by Bald. That's sufficient for the Miller sting to operate. It's this very surface thing which is so marvelous. After all, any death is merely a quibble about the chemical composition of the blood. They may be dead in different ways, by Miller rather than by Bald. What's the odds, things being what they are. And what they are stands out here by a sort of hot, globigerina ooze that covers the bottom of the dead sea floor.

Perhaps Miller himself is drawn and quartered and doesn't know it. You could not strip yourself this way except as you are a corpse before corpses. It's like an exhibition of meat, all on hooks.

Down to the abattoir level. Everything is little droppings before this enormous defecation. A huge raw maw that pours out a juice to digest anything in this huge one-ness of his. What a price to pay for integrity. This, I feel it in my boots, is the funeral march of this section of the world, rubbing its anus against the pillow of the moon. A polyp. How it continues without something more terrible happening is beyond me. People have got to be eaten in this book. It calls for an unspeakable violence that the slight sterility of writing contradicts. It's the human disaster that one expects,—inhuman you might say, but the world is that way, so it's human.

Miller ought to write this one book and then be shot. Here your intellectual gets the dirt of his own prophecy thrown back in the face. . . . So because I am glad for acceleration I am glad the book has been written. It's inevitable. As it has to come, I am glad it is en route. That's the intellect—optimism.

As far as the bowels go, I loathe the material—masturbation of each other's deadness that I read through the pages. That anyone accepts this as an

audience to which to be alive. A corpse diddling itself.

Writing machine?—Not at all. He's a Miller-machine, a huge, blood-sucking Miller-machine. The moment something has to be relived it's gone. Raw stuff, hot from the griddle, a raw ingot, worthless unless it's real hot; then it can make an impression. There's sterility in its violence.

“The terrible fluidity of self-revelation.” That's why he likes the Jews. Somehow their analysis allows him to inspect his vomit.

*Everything about me is so beautiful, my ugliness, my genitals, my filth and the way I talk Roman. Why the bridges? Isn't it worthwhile dying for this? You are immortal because it leaves no impression. It passes off like an unsuccessful wet dream.*

## THE BOOSTER

*Frederick J. Hoffman*

*The Phoenix's* European editor is one of the interesting enigmas of our century. His writing is brilliant and facile, his subject matter a parade of the grotesque and the scatological. Miller has contributed much to *avant-garde* publications: *transition*, *Horizon*, and *The Phoenix*, among others. *New Directions* has published some of his work in its various annuals, and the *New Directions* Press has presented some of his books. In 1937 Miller and several of his friends took over a magazine called *The Booster*, apparently at the time an aid to American tourists in Paris, supervised by the American Country Club. With the issue of September 1937, *The Booster* presented a remarkably changed appearance to its startled readers. Surrounded by conventional advertisements of tourist agencies and businesses, there were the unconventional writings of Miller, Alfred Perlès, Lawrence Durrell, William Saroyan, and others. The changed policy was announced in the editorial of the September issue. In fact, *The Booster* was to have "no fixed policy," except to be "eclectic, flexible, alive," a "contraceptive against the self-destructive spirit of the age." Shortly after the appearance of this issue, the respectable men who had previously owned the magazine published a statement "denying responsibility" for its contents. The adver-

tisements disappeared and the name was changed to *The Delta*.

The burden of Miller's writings in *The Booster* and its successor is his advocacy of creative life among biological and metaphysical byways. He suggests that we are wrong in protecting ourselves from death—that we should face death and terror with full recognition of its challenge and its beauty. Much of modern society is suffering a "living death," from its fear of facing the fundamental drives of nature. Miller's attitude resembles a kind of incestuous pantheism, borrowing as it does from the secret places of human functioning and exaggerating their importance. He seems to have expanded upon Lawrence's primitivism and to have made an aesthetics of psychiatry. The earth is an "enormous womb," a place where everything is brought to life. Life itself was glorious for Lawrence, and he did not hesitate to regard all healthy demonstrations of it with enthusiasm. Miller, however, is much more interested in the processes by which life appears and moves toward organic death. The birth trauma is in a sense a basis for Miller's point of view. The world is really "nothing but a great womb, the place where everything is brought to life" ("The Enormous Womb," *The Booster*, IV, 21).

This philosophy of life as darkness and desire for death—the organic striving always to become inorganic—is derived in large from psycho-medical researches into the unconscious. The fundamental reaches of the human personality are the dark areas in which are bred the neurotics of our day. In his analysis of the painting of Hans Reichel, Miller gives expression to his own beliefs:

"This cosmological eye is sunk deep within his body. Everything he looks at and seizes must be brought below the threshold of consciousness, brought deep into

the entrails where there reigns an absolute night where also the tender little mouths with which he absorbs his vision eat away until only the quintessence remains. Here in the warm bowels, the metamorphosis takes place. In the absolute night, in the black pain hidden away in the backbone, the substance of things is dissolved until only the essence shines forth." ("The Cosmological Eye," *transition*, XXVII—April—May 1938—323.)

# UN ÉCRIVAIN AMÉRICAIN NOUS EST NÉ

*Blaise Cendrars*

UNTO US IS BORN an American writer—Henry Miller who has just written his first book, Henry Miller who has just published his first book in Paris. A noble book, a frightful book, just the kind of book I like best. The story of a foreigner who lands in Paris, gets lost there, loses his way; an American who dives into the lower depths, who latches on to harlots and drunks in all kinds of neighborhoods; a stranger who seeks and flees the nightwalkers of Montparnasse and Montmartre, who listens to their stories and tells them a few of his own, and then runs off, staggering; a man who is often drunk, to be sure, but even more often dizzy with hunger—for this vagabond wanders for six years, going around in circles for six years, like that poor Saint Labre in eighteenth-century Rome. But since this wanderer in Paris is not a mystic, nor the poor fevered victim of hallucinations of the *Soliloquies* of Jehan Rictus, nor a Slavic aesthete in the manner of the late Rainer Maria Rilke's Malte Laurids Brigge, nor even, although Nordic, a scientific Protestant like Strindberg, filled with horror and driven to distraction by loneliness and misery in Paris—since he is none of these, but a good down-to-earth realist, our American friend, even when he suffers from vertigo, knows that

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it comes from hunger. So, in discovering Paris, he swallows some of it—rabidly eats, vomits and spews forth the city, loves her and curses her until the day he senses dimly that he too belongs to the extraordinary populace that lives in the streets of that great city, that Paris has permeated his being, and that henceforth he will never be able to live anywhere else. In a daze, then, he sets out to write what has happened to him, and even though he is a 100% American writing in English, this book in its way of revealing creatures and objects and putting matters nakedly (in the manner of Mirbeau, *non ad usum Delphini*), this book springs from our soil, and Henry Miller is one of us, in spirit, in style, in his power and in his gifts, a universal writer like all those who have been able to put into a book their own vision of Paris. It is only fitting and proper that I should salute you, my dear Henry Miller, because I too have wandered poor and forlorn in the unfriendly streets of a big city in a foreign country where I knew not a living soul and where I wrote my first book. That was in your own New York, my friend. But that is another story.

## TWILIGHT OF THE EXPATRIATES

*Edmund Wilson*

*The Tropic of Cancer*, by Henry Miller, was published in Paris four years ago, but nobody, so far as I know, has ever reviewed it in the United States, and it seems to me to deserve some notice.

Every phase of literary opinion is responsible for its critical injustices. During the twenties, this book would have been discussed in the *Little Review*, the *Dial* and *Broom*. Today the conventional critics are evidently too much shocked by it to be able to bring themselves to deal with it—though their neglect of it cannot wholly have been determined by the reflex reactions of squeamishness. A book bound in paper and published in Paris has no chance against a book bound in cloth and brought out by a New York publisher, who will buy space to announce its appearance. The conservative literary reviews have not been so easily outraged that they would not give respectful attention to John O'Hara's *Butterfield 8* or squander space on the inferior Hemingway of *To Have and Have Not*. As for the Left-Wingers, they have ignored *The Tropic of Cancer* on the ground that it is merely a product of the decadent expatriate culture and can be of no interest to the socially minded and forward-looking present.

Expatriate Mr. Miller certainly is: he is the spokes-

man, par excellence, for the Left Bank; but he has produced the most remarkable book which, as far as my reading goes, has come from it in many years. *The Tropic of Cancer* is a good piece of writing; and it has also a sort of historical importance. It is the epitaph for the whole generation of American writers and artists that migrated to Paris after the war. The theme of *The Tropic of Cancer* is the lives of a group of Americans who have all more or less come to Paris with the intention of occupying themselves with literature but who have actually subsided easily into an existence almost exclusively preoccupied with drinking and fornication, varied occasionally by the reading of a book or a visit to a picture exhibition—an existence for which they muster the resources by such expedients as pimping for travellers, playing gigolo to rich old ladies and sponging on one another. The tone of the book is undoubtedly low; *The Tropic of Cancer*, in fact, from the point of view both of its happenings and of the language in which they are conveyed, is the lowest book of any real literary merit that I ever remember to have read; it makes Defoe's *Newgate Calendar* look like Plutarch. But if you can stand it, it is sometimes quite funny; for Mr. Miller has discovered and exploits a new field of the picaresque.

The disreputable adventures of Mr. Miller's rogues are varied from time to time with phosphorescent flights of reverie devoted to the ecstasies of art or the doom of European civilization. These passages, though old-fashioned and rhetorical in a vein of late romantic fantasy reminiscent of *Les Chants de Maldoror*, have a youthful and even ingenuous sound in queer contrast to the cynicism of the story. And there is a strange amenity of temper and style which bathes the whole composition even when it is disgusting or tiresome. It has frequently been characteristic of the American

writers in Paris that they have treated pretentious subjects with incompetent style and sordid feeling. Mr. Miller has done the opposite: he has treated an ignoble subject with a sure hand at color and rhythm. He is not self-conscious and not amateurish. And he has somehow managed to be low without being really sordid.

The last episode of *The Tropic of Cancer* has a deadly ironic value. A friend of the narrator called Fillmore, who is unique among these cadgers and spongers in enjoying a small regular income, becomes entangled in an affair with a French girl, who is pregnant and declares him responsible. Poor Fillmore first drinks himself into an insane asylum; then, emerging, falls straight into the clutches of the girl and her peasant family. They reduce him to utter abjection: he is to marry her, set her father up in business. The girl quarrels with him every night over dinner. The narrator suggests to Fillmore that he run away and go back home. For the latter, the glamor is all off Paris: he has been up against the French as they really are (in general these émigrés see nobody but one another); he realizes at last that the French regard Americans as romantic idiots; and he is weepily homesick for America. He allows himself to be sent off on a train, leaving the narrator a sum of money to provide for the girl's accouchement.

But as soon as Fillmore is gone, the helpful hero, left to himself, with the money for the girl in his pocket, decides that good old Paris, after all, is a wonderful place to be. "Certainly never before," he thinks, "had I had so much in my fist at one time. It was a treat to break a thousand-franc note. I held it up to the light to look at the beautiful watermark. Beautiful money! One of the few things the French make on a grand scale. Artistically done, too, as if they

cherished a deep affection even for the symbol." Ginette need never know about it; and, after all, suppose her pregnancy was all a bluff. He goes for a drive in the Bois. Does he want to take the money, he asks himself, and return to America too? It is the first opportunity he has had. No: a great peace comes over him now. He knows that for half an hour he has money to throw away. He buys himself an excellent dinner and muses on the Seine in the setting sun. He feels it flowing quietly through him: "its past, its ancient soil, the changing climate." It is only when they are looked at close-to that human beings repel one by their ugliness; they become negligible when one can put them at a distance. A deep feeling of well-being fills him.

In retelling this incident from *The Tropic of Cancer*, have I made it more comic than it is meant to be? Perhaps: because Mr. Miller evidently attaches some importance to the vaporings of his hero on the banks of the Seine. But he presents him as he really lives, and not merely in his vaporings or his poses. He gives us the genuine American bum come to lead the beautiful life in Paris; and he lays him away forever in his dope of Pernod and dreams.

March 9, 1938

Mr. Miller, in reply to this review, wrote the *New Republic* the following letter, which appeared in the issue of May 18. I regret that I am unable to restore a passage cut by the editors.

Sir: There are several inaccuracies in Mr. Wilson's review of *Tropic of Cancer* . . .

First of all, I should like it to be known that the book has been reviewed before, by Professor Herbert West. It has been mentioned numerous times in a sensational manner by so-called reputable magazines

in America. . . . The theme of the book, moreover, is not at all what Mr. Wilson describes: the theme is myself, and the narrator, or the hero, as your critic puts it, is also myself. I am not clear whether, in the last paragraph of his review, Mr. Wilson meant to imply that Fillmore is the genuine American bum, or myself. If he means the narrator, then it is me, because I have painstakingly indicated throughout the book that the hero is myself. I don't use "heroes," incidentally, nor do I write novels. I am the hero, and the book is myself. . . .

Perhaps the worst mistake which the eminent critic makes in his review is to say that because a book is bound in paper and published in Paris, it has no chance against a book bound in cloth and sold in New York. This is the very contrary of the truth. Without any hocus-pocus of the American publicity agents, almost entirely by word-of-mouth recommendations, *Tropic of Cancer* has already gone into several editions at a price which for Europe is prohibitive. It is now being translated into three languages. It may be procured at leading bookstores in practically every important city of the world excepting those of America, England, Germany and Russia. It has been reviewed enthusiastically by some of the foremost critics of Europe. If it has not yet brought me riches, it has at any rate brought me fame and recognition. And, whether it is given notice by American reviewers or not, Americans coming to Europe buy it, as they once bought *Ulysses* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

A conspiracy of silence, like censorship, can defeat its own ends. Sometimes it pays *not* to advertise. Sometimes the most effective, realistic thing to do is to be impractical, to fly in the face of the wind. The Obelisk Press took my book on faith, against all commercial wisdom. The results have been gratifying

in every way. I should like to add that the Obelisk Press will publish any book of quality which the ordinary commercial publisher refuses, for one reason or another, to handle. Any writer with guts who is unable to get a hearing in America might do well to look to Paris. And damn all the critics anyway! The best publicity for a man who has anything to say is silence.

Henry Miller

Paris, France

## INSIDE THE WHALE

*George Orwell*

WHEN HENRY MILLER'S NOVEL, *Tropic of Cancer*, appeared in 1935, it was greeted with rather cautious praise, obviously conditioned in some cases by a fear of seeming to enjoy pornography. Among the people who praised it were T. S. Eliot, Herbert Read, Aldous Huxley, John Dos Passos, Ezra Pound—on the whole, not the writers who are in fashion at this moment. And in fact the subject matter of the book, and to a certain extent its mental atmosphere, belong to the twenties rather than to the thirties.

*Tropic of Cancer* is a novel in the first person, or autobiography in the form of a novel, whichever way you like to look at it. Miller himself insists that it is straight autobiography, but the tempo and method of telling the story are those of a novel. It is a story of the American Paris, but not along quite the usual lines, because the Americans who figure in it happen to be people without money. During the boom years, when dollars were plentiful and the exchange-value of the franc was low, Paris was invaded by such a swarm of artists, writers, students, dilettanti, sight-seers, debauchees, and plain idlers as the world has probably never seen. In some quarters of the town the so-called artists must actually have outnumbered the working population—indeed, it has been reckoned that in the

late twenties there were as many as 30,000 painters in Paris, most of them impostors. The populace had grown so hardened to artists that gruff-voiced lesbians in corduroy breeches and young men in Grecian or medieval costume could walk the streets without attracting a glance, and along the Seine banks by Notre Dame it was almost impossible to pick one's way between the sketching-stools. It was the age of dark horses and neglected genii; the phrase on everybody's lips was "*Quand je serai lancé*." As it turned out, nobody was "*lancé*," the slump descended like another Ice Age, the cosmopolitan mob of artists vanished, and the huge Montparnasse cafés which only ten years ago were filled till the small hours by hordes of shrieking poseurs have turned into darkened tombs in which there are not even any ghosts. It is this world—described in, among other novels, Wyndham Lewis's *Tarr*—that Miller is writing about, but he is dealing only with the under side of it, the lumpen-proletarian fringe which has been able to survive the slump because it is composed partly of genuine artists and partly of genuine scoundrels. The neglected genii, the paranoiacs who are always "*going to*" write the novel that will knock Proust into a cocked hat, are there, but they are only genii in the rather rare moments when they are not scouting about for the next meal. For the most part it is a story of bug-ridden rooms in working-men's hotels, of fights, drinking bouts, cheap brothels, Russian refugees, cadging, swindling, and temporary jobs. And the whole atmosphere of the poor quarters of Paris as a foreigner sees them—the cobbled alleys, the sour reek of refuse, the bistros with their greasy zinc counters and worn brick floors, the green waters of the Seine, the blue cloaks of the Republican Guard, the crumbling iron urinals, the peculiar sweetish smell of the Metro

stations, the cigarettes that come to pieces, the pigeons in the Luxembourg Gardens—it is all there, or at any rate the feeling of it is there.

On the face of it no material could be less promising. When *Tropic of Cancer* was published the Italians were marching into Abyssinia and Hitler's concentration camps were already bulging. The intellectual foci of the world were Rome, Moscow, and Berlin. It did not seem to be a moment at which a novel of outstanding value was likely to be written about American dead-beats cadging drinks in the Latin Quarter. Of course a novelist is not obliged to write directly about contemporary history, but a novelist who simply disregards the major public events of the moment is generally either a fooler or a plain idiot. From a mere account of the subject matter of *Tropic of Cancer* most people would probably assume it to be no more than a bit of naughty-naughty left over from the twenties. Actually, nearly everyone who read it saw at once that it was nothing of the kind, but a very remarkable book. How or why remarkable? That question is never easy to answer. It is better to begin by describing the impression that *Tropic of Cancer* has left on my own mind.

When I first opened *Tropic of Cancer* and saw that it was full of unprintable words, my immediate reaction was a refusal to be impressed. Most people's would be the same, I believe. Nevertheless, after a lapse of time the atmosphere of the book, besides innumerable details, seemed to linger in my memory in a peculiar way. A year later Miller's second book, *Black Spring*, was published. By this time *Tropic of Cancer* was much more vividly present in my mind than it had been when I first read it. My first feeling about *Black Spring* was that it showed a falling-off, and it is a fact that it has not the same unity as the other

book. Yet after another year there were many passages in *Black Spring* that had also rooted themselves in my memory. Evidently these books are of the sort to leave a flavour behind them—books that “create a world of their own,” as the saying goes. The books that do this are not necessarily good books, they may be good bad books like *Raffles* or the *Sherlock Holmes* stories, or perverse and morbid books like *Wuthering Heights* or *The House with the Green Shutters*. But now and again there appears a novel which opens up a new world not by revealing what is strange, but by revealing what is familiar. The truly remarkable thing about *Ulysses*, for instance, is the commonplaceness of its material. Of course there is much more in *Ulysses* than this, because Joyce is a kind of poet and also an elephantine pedant, but his real achievement has been to get the familiar on to paper. He dared—for it is a matter of *daring* just as much as of technique—to expose the imbecilities of the inner mind, and in doing so he discovered an America which was under everybody’s nose. Here is a whole world of stuff which you supposed to be of its nature incommunicable, and somebody has managed to communicate it. The effect is to break down, at any rate momentarily, the solitude in which the human being lives. When you read certain passages in *Ulysses* you feel that Joyce’s mind and your mind are one, that he knows all about you though he has never heard your name, that there exists some world outside time and space in which you and he are together. And though he does not resemble Joyce in other ways, there is a touch of this quality in Henry Miller. Not everywhere, because his work is very uneven, and sometimes, especially in *Black Spring*, tends to slide away into mere verbiage or into the squashy universe of the surrealists. But read him for five pages, ten

pages, and you feel the peculiar relief that comes not so much from understanding as from *being understood*. "He knows all about me," you feel; "he wrote this specially for me." It is as though you could hear a voice speaking to you, a friendly American voice, with no humbug in it, no moral purpose, merely an implicit assumption that we are all alike. For the moment you have got away from the lies and simplifications, the stylized, marionette-like quality of ordinary fiction, even quite good fiction, and are dealing with the recognizable experiences of human beings.

But what kind of experience? What kind of human beings? Miller is writing about the man in the street, and it is incidentally rather a pity that it should be a street full of brothels. That is the penalty of leaving your native land. It means transferring your roots into shallower soil. Exile is probably more damaging to a novelist than to a painter or even a poet, because its effect is to take him out of contact with working life and narrow down his range to the street, the café, the church, the brothel and the studio. On the whole, in Miller's books you are reading about people living the expatriate life, people drinking, talking, meditating, and fornicating, not about people working, marrying, and bringing up children; a pity, because he would have described the one set of activities as well as the other. In *Black Spring* there is a wonderful flashback of New York, the swarming Irish-infested New York of the O. Henry period, but the Paris scenes are the best, and, granted their utter worthlessness as social types, the drunks and deadbeats of the cafés are handled with a feeling for character and a mastery of technique that are unapproached in any at all recent novel. All of them are not only credible but completely familiar; you have the feeling that all their adventures have happened to yourself. Not that they

are anything very startling in the way of adventures. Henry gets a job with a melancholy Indian student, gets another job at a dreadful French school during a cold snap when the lavatories are frozen solid, goes on drinking bouts in Le Havre with his friend Collins, the sea captain, goes to brothels where there are wonderful Negresses, talks with his friend Van Norden, the novelist, who has got the great novel of the world in his head but can never bring himself to begin writing it. His friend Karl, on the verge of starvation, is picked up by a wealthy widow who wishes to marry him. There are interminable Hamlet-like conversations in which Karl tries to decide which is worse, being hungry or sleeping with an old woman. In great detail he describes his visits to the widow, how he went to the hotel dressed in his best, how before going in he neglected to urinate, so that the whole evening was one long crescendo of torment, etc., etc. And after all, none of it is true, the widow doesn't even exist—Karl has simply invented her in order to make himself seem important. The whole book is in this vein, more or less. Why is it that these monstrous trivialities are so engrossing? Simply because the whole atmosphere is deeply familiar, because you have all the while the feeling that these things are happening to *you*. And you have this feeling because somebody has chosen to drop the Geneva language of the ordinary novel and drag the *real-politik* of the inner mind into the open. In Miller's case it is not so much a question of exploring the mechanisms of the mind as of owning up to everyday facts and everyday emotions. For the truth is that many ordinary people, perhaps an actual majority, do speak and behave in just the way that is recorded here. The callous coarseness with which the characters in *Tropic of Cancer* talk is very rare in fiction, but it is extremely common

in real life; again and again I have heard just such conversations from people who were not even aware that they were talking coarsely. It is worth noticing that *Tropic of Cancer* is not a young man's book. Miller was in his forties when it was published, and though since then he has produced three or four others, it is obvious that this first book had been lived with for years. It is one of those books that are slowly matured in poverty and obscurity, by people who know what they have got to do and therefore are able to wait. The prose is astonishing, and in parts of *Black Spring* is even better. Unfortunately I cannot quote; unprintable words occur almost everywhere. But get hold of *Tropic of Cancer*, get hold of *Black Spring* and read especially the first hundred pages. They give you an idea of what can still be done, even at this late date, with English prose. In them, English is treated as a spoken language, but spoken *without fear*, i.e., without fear of rhetoric or of the unusual or poetical word. The adjective has come back, after its ten years' exile. It is a flowing, swelling prose, a prose with rhythms in it, something quite different from the flat cautious statements and snack-bar dialects that are now in fashion.

When a book like *Tropic of Cancer* appears, it is only natural that the first thing people notice should be its obscenity. Given our current notions of literary decency, it is not at all easy to approach an unprintable book with detachment. Either one is shocked and disgusted, or one is morbidly thrilled, or one is determined above all else not to be impressed. The last is probably the commonest reaction, with the result that unprintable books often get less attention than they deserve. It is rather the fashion to say that nothing is easier than to write an obscene book, that people only do it in order to get themselves talked about and make money, etc., etc. What makes

it obvious that this is not the case is that books which are obscene in the police-court sense are distinctly uncommon. If there were easy money to be made out of dirty words, a lot more people would be making it. But, because "obscene" books do not appear very frequently, there is a tendency to lump them together, as a rule quite unjustifiably. *Tropic of Cancer* has been vaguely associated with two other books, *Ulysses* and *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, but in neither case is there much resemblance. What Miller has in common with Joyce is a willingness to mention the inane, squalid facts of everyday life. Putting aside differences of technique, the funeral scene in *Ulysses*, for instance, would fit into *Tropic of Cancer*; the whole chapter is a sort of confession, an *exposé* of the frightful inner callousness of the human being. But there the resemblance ends. As a novel, *Tropic of Cancer* is far inferior to *Ulysses*. Joyce is an artist, in a sense in which Miller is not and probably would not wish to be, and in any case he is attempting much more. He is exploring different states of consciousness, dream, reverie (the "bronze-by-gold" chapter), drunkenness, etc., and dovetailing them all into a huge complex pattern, almost like a Victorian "plot." Miller is simply a hard-boiled person talking about life, an ordinary American businessman with intellectual courage and a gift for words. It is perhaps significant that he *looks* exactly like everyone's idea of an American businessman. As for the comparison with *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, it is even further from the point. Both books use unprintable words, both are in some sense autobiographical, but that is all. *Voyage au bout de la nuit* is a book-with-a-purpose, and its purpose is to protest against the horror and meaninglessness of modern life—actually, indeed, of *life*. It is a cry of unbearable disgust, a voice from the cesspool.

*Tropic of Cancer* is almost exactly the opposite. The thing has become so unusual as to seem almost anomalous, but it is the book of a man who is happy. So is *Black Spring*, though slightly less so, because tinged in places with nostalgia. With years of lumpen-proletarian life behind him, hunger, vagabondage, dirt, failure, nights in the open, battles with immigration officers, endless struggles for a bit of cash, Miller finds that he is enjoying himself. Exactly the aspects of life that fill Céline with horror are the ones that appeal to him. So far from protesting, he is *accepting*. And the very word "acceptance" calls up his real affinity, another American, Walt Whitman.

But there is something rather curious in being Whitman in the nineteen-thirties. It is not certain that if Whitman himself were alive at the moment he would write anything in the least degree resembling *Leaves of Grass*. For what he is saying, after all, is "I accept," and there is a radical difference between acceptance now and acceptance then. Whitman was writing in a time of unexampled prosperity, but more than that, he was writing in a country where freedom was something more than a word. The democracy, equality, and comradeship that he is always talking about are not remote ideals, but something that existed in front of his eyes. In mid-nineteenth-century America men felt themselves free and equal, *were* free and equal, so far as that is possible outside a society of pure communism. There was poverty and there were even class distinctions, but except for the Negroes there was no permanently submerged class. Everyone had inside him, like a kind of core, the knowledge that he could earn a decent living, and earn it without bootlicking. When you read about Mark Twain's Mississippi raftsmen and pilots, or Bret Harte's Western goldminers, they seem more remote than the cannibals

of the Stone Age. The reason is simply that they are free human beings. But it is the same even with the peaceful domesticated America of the Eastern states, the America of *Little Women*, *Helen's Babies*, and *Riding Down from Bangor*. Life has a buoyant, carefree quality that you can feel as you read, like a physical sensation in your belly. It is this that Whitman is celebrating, though actually he does it very badly, because he is one of those writers who tell you what you ought to feel instead of making you feel it. Luckily for his beliefs, perhaps, he died too early to see the deterioration in American life that came with the rise of large-scale industry and the exploiting of cheap immigrant labour.

Miller's outlook is deeply akin to that of Whitman, and nearly everyone who has read him has remarked on this. *Tropic of Cancer* ends with an especially Whitmanesque passage, in which, after the lecheries, the swindles, the fights, the drinking bouts, and the imbecilities, he simply sits down and watches the Seine flowing past, in a sort of mystical acceptance of thing-as-it-is. Only, what is he accepting? In the first place, not America, but the ancient bone-heap of Europe, where every grain of soil has passed through innumerable human bodies. Secondly, not an epoch of expansion and liberty, but an epoch of fear, tyranny, and regimentation. To say "I accept" in an age like our own is to say that you accept concentration camps, rubber truncheons, Hitler, Stalin, bombs, aeroplanes, tinned food, machine guns, putsches, purges, slogans, Bedaux belts, gas masks, submarines, spies, provocateurs, press censorship, secret prisons, aspirins, Hollywood films, and political murders. Not only those things, of course, but those things among others. And on the whole this is Henry Miller's attitude. Not quite always, because at

moments he shows signs of a fairly ordinary kind of literary nostalgia. There is a long passage in the earlier part of *Black Spring*, in praise of the Middle Ages, which as prose must be one of the most remarkable pieces of writing in recent years, but which displays an attitude not very different from that of Chesterton. In *Max and the White Phagocytes* there is an attack on modern American civilization (breakfast cereals, cellophane, etc.) from the usual angle of the literary man who hates industrialism. But in general the attitude is "Let's swallow it whole." And hence the seeming preoccupation with indecency and with the dirty-handkerchief side of life. It is only seeming, for the truth is that ordinary everyday life consists far more largely of horrors than writers of fiction usually care to admit. Whitman himself "accepted" a great deal that his contemporaries found unmentionable. For his is not only writing of the prairie, he also wanders through the city and notes the shattered skull of the suicide, the "grey sick faces of onanists," etc., etc. But unquestionably our own age, at any rate in Western Europe, is less healthy and less hopeful than the age in which Whitman was writing. Unlike Whitman, we live in a *shrinking* world. The "democratic vistas" have ended in barbed wire. There is less feeling of creation and growth, less and less emphasis on the cradle, endlessly rocking, more and more emphasis on the teapot, endlessly stewing. To accept civilization *as it is* practically means accepting decay. It has ceased to be a strenuous attitude and become a passive attitude—even "decadent," if that word means anything.

But precisely because, in one sense, he is passive to experience, Miller is able to get nearer to the ordinary man than is possible to more purposive writers. For the ordinary man is also passive. Within a narrow

circle (home life, and perhaps the trade union or local politics) he feels himself master of his fate, but against major events he is as helpless as against the elements. So far from endeavouring to influence the future, he simply lies down and lets things happen to him. During the past ten years literature has involved itself more and more deeply in politics, with the result that there is now less room in it for the ordinary man than at any time during the past two centuries. One can see the change in the prevailing literary attitude by comparing the books written about the Spanish civil war with those written about the war of 1914-18. The immediately striking thing about the Spanish war books, at any rate those written in English, is their shocking dullness and badness. But what is more significant is that almost all of them, right-wing or left-wing, are written from a political angle, by cocksure partisans telling you what to think, whereas the books about the Great War were written by common soldiers or junior officers who did not even pretend to understand what the whole thing was about. Books like *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Le Feu*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *Death of a Hero*, *Goodbye to All That*, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, and *A Subaltern on the Somme* were written not by propagandists but by *victims*. They are saying in effect, "What the hell is all this about? God knows. All we can do is to endure." And though he is not writing about war, nor, on the whole, about unhappiness, this is nearer to Miller's attitude than the omniscience which is now fashionable. The *Booster*, a short-lived periodical of which he was part-editor, used to describe itself in its advertisements as "non-political, non-educational, non-progressive, non-co-operative, non-ethical, non-literary, non-consistent, non-contemporary," and Miller's own work could be described in nearly the same

terms. It is a voice from the crowd, from the underling, from the third-class carriage, from the ordinary, non-political, non-moral, passive man.

I have been using the phrase "ordinary man" rather loosely, and I have taken it for granted that the "ordinary man" exists, a thing now denied by some people. I do not mean that the people Miller is writing about constitute a majority, still less that he is writing about proletarians. No English or American novelist has as yet seriously attempted that. And again, the people in *Tropic of Cancer* fall short of being ordinary to the extent that they are idle, disreputable, and more or less "artistic." As I have said already, this is a pity, but it is the necessary result of expatriation. Miller's "ordinary man" is neither the manual worker nor the suburban householder, but the derelict, the *déclassé*, the adventurer, the American intellectual without roots and without money. Still, the experiences even of this type overlap fairly widely with those of more normal people. Miller has been able to get the most out of his rather limited material because he has had the courage to identify with it. The ordinary man, the "average sensual man," has been given the power of speech, like Balaam's ass.

It will be seen that this is something out of date, or at any rate out of fashion. The average sensual man is out of fashion. Preoccupation with sex and truthfulness about the inner life are out of fashion. American Paris is out of fashion. A book like *Tropic of Cancer*, published at such a time, must be either a tedious preciosity or something unusual, and I think a majority of the people who have read it would agree that it is not the first.

# THE WORLD OF HENRY MILLER

*Herbert J. Muller*

“PERHAPS IN READING THIS,” writes Henry Miller in *Tropic of Capricorn*, “one has still the impression of chaos but this is written from a live center.” The impression of chaos is plain enough. The latest chapter of his spiritual autobiography \* is an extraordinary jumble of narrative, treatise, fantasy, satire, goat song, manifesto, and myth, pitched in every key from the obscene to the mystical; it is even fiercer than *Tropic of Cancer* in its defiance of the proprieties of art and life. “What is chaotic,” Mr. Miller explains, “is merely peripheral, the tangential shreds . . . of a world which no longer concerns me”; but this is the world of social relationships and practical dealings that is the whole concern of most men. Nevertheless there is indeed something very live here: a remarkable personality, a remarkable talent. There is also a center, with significant lines of reference. Mr. Miller is not merely an original; his bearings as well as his gifts make it important to locate him.

The subtitle of *Tropic of Capricorn* gives the

\* The works on which this study is based are *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), *Black Spring* (1936), *Max and the White Phagocytes* (1938), and *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939), all published by the Obelisk Press, Paris. *The Cosmological Eye* (1939), published by New Directions, Norfolk, Connecticut, is a collection of pieces—necessarily somewhat expurgated—taken mostly from *Max and the White Phagocytes*.

obvious clue—"On the Ovarian Trolley." The trolley is headed for the "ovarian world," the "super-infantile realm" where one may become attuned to the "life rhythm" and experience again the "irresponsibility of the anarchic man," a "New World" that is yet "a far older world than any we have known"—the world, in short, of D. H. Lawrence. Mr. Miller takes his place in the widespread revolt against intellect. "There's no improving the mind," he insists. "Look to your heart and gizzard." And he might well have added another organ. Though he does not so clearly as Lawrence exalt sex as the chief means to the good natural life, it is one of his main topics, and supplies the occasion and the vocabulary for a still more vehement protest against the convention that allows the unmentionable to be mentioned only in *de luxe* editions. "They [the rest of the world] are having sexual intercourse, God bless them"; Mr. Miller feels alone in the land of four-letter words. And the reviewer, who must paraphrase, feels like a sissy.

Mr. Miller's world also contains, however, elements not to be found in Lawrence: daredevil adventure, lusty laughter, exuberant fancy, extravagant caprice—a wild gaiety and gusto that temper his bitterness. He is in many ways a more natural and more attractive primitive than Lawrence. At the same time, his love of grotesquerie has been intensified by his defiant, rebellious attitudes; and so it finally carried him all the way into Surrealism and Dada. He was delighted by the incidental swagger of Dada, the freakish pranks and the play with such "startlingly marvelous phrases" as "doubt's duck with the vermouth lips." He also committed himself to the fundamental negations: the principle of scorning all principles, the logic of being illogical, the value of turning all accepted values inside out. Indeed, he is still more thoroughgoing in his

anarchism. In "An Open Letter to Surrealists Everywhere" he objects even to Surrealism (as no doubt he would to anarchism); any organized faith or creed is a sign of "impotency," all imitation is suicide. That a society of anarchic individuals is a contradiction in terms does not bother him. He insists that civilization is hell-bent anyway, and the sooner it gets there the better.

Now, it is at once hard and easy to attack Mr. Miller's position. It is hard because one cannot really get at him at all. He begins by rejecting all the principles and values to which one ordinarily appeals; opposition is absolute all along the line, every irresistible assertion collides with an immovable negation. It is nevertheless easy to point out fundamental inconsistencies in his attitudes, contradictions of fact—the practical futility of his whole effort to deny the consequences of having a mind and being a member of society. Mr. Miller's ideal man can exist only in the womb. He declares that he became sane when he finally saw through the bugaboo of Knowledge; the sane man has "very little brain because there is very little baggage to carry about." In fact, he himself has very considerable brains, constantly exercises them, and carries about an unusual erudition—intellectuals may often find it hard to keep up with him. Briefly, there is a great deal of romantic nonsense in Mr. Miller.

It is also, I believe, most dangerous nonsense. Today he may regard the war as the final proof of the hopelessness and horror of civilization, but he may also have some misgivings about the glory of primitive instinct and unreason. He thrusts his ideas upon us so insistently, at any rate, that he lays himself wide open to the "ideological" criticism in which contemporaries specialize. Yet he is primarily an artist, not a social philosopher, and the immediate issue for criticism

is what his attitudes do to his work as an artist. He has an ultra-romantic passion for utter freedom. Only when free, he remarks in "Hamlet," can the artist be possessed. Once possessed, however, the artist would seem to be no longer free; and I should say that the ideas that possess Mr. Miller are cause and effect of the most serious faults of his work.

Like Carlyle, he believes that the ideal is silence (he prefers music above all other arts "because it tends toward silence"); like Carlyle, he is forever talking and at the top of his voice. Often, moreover, he talks like a boastful youngster. "I know how to avoid work," he asserts, "how to avoid entangling relationships, how to avoid pity, sympathy, bravery, and all the other pitfalls." The idea is that the artist, as the most superior of anarchic individuals, must at all costs guard against attachments—to people and sentiments as well as to principles, traditions, ideas. Actually, of course, he cannot cut out all the fatal attachments—if he could, nothing would be left of the Self he prizes. Thus he also announces that below the belt all men are brothers, often exhibits decent, humane sentiments, even becomes banal in expressions of gratitude ("If it hadn't been for Fillmore I don't know where I should be today—dead, most likely"). His rebellion against society is finally in the name of a richer humanity. But meanwhile his autobiography is often simply unpleasant. In the latest installment he relates still more ostentatiously how he sponged on his friends, seduced their wives or sisters, lied, betrayed, stole.

Mr. Miller's ardent admirers seem to regard this extravagance as the proof of his originality, sincerity, depth, power. Similarly they applaud his disorder; in the introduction to *Tropic of Cancer* Anaïs Nin invites critics to strangle themselves with this "bundle

man  
is  
artist

Self

of shreds and fibres." But Mr. Miller will be no better off for their strangling. The serious trouble with him is that his innumerable contradictions are all shapes of a deep confusion, the chaos is *not* merely peripheral. The world that supposedly no longer concerns him is in fact very much with him, and his efforts to be thoroughly consistent only emphasize the fundamental inconsistency. The result of this inner turmoil is not merely considerable waste motion and emotion but an aggravation of his natural tendency to excess. He makes a virtue of all his vices, a cult of anarchy. Now his remarkable talents merely fizz and sputter, now they explode all over the place.

More specifically, the issues raised by Mr. Miller's art center in his intoxicated hymn to life, *Life! LIFE*. Intellect, science, society, civilization, ninety-nine percent of what passes for art and literature—he hates them all as monstrous perversions of **REALITY**. Despite the capitals (his own), the meaning is a little vague. He has himself asked the pertinent question in his objection to Freudian adjustments to reality: *what reality? whose reality?* Nevertheless his passion for taking life straight explains his distinctive habits as a writer. He insists upon writing nothing but autobiography in the first person; fiction, invention presumably might be artificial or literary. He makes a necessity of the "divine jumble" he adores; to straighten things out is to tamper with life and gain nothing. For the same reason he is brutally outspoken, draws no lines, rejects all formal discipline, refuses to tidy up after a job. "The violence and obscenity are left unadulterated," Anaïs Nin explains, "as manifestation of the mystery and pain which ever accompanies the act of creation." The obscenity, unfortunately, is bound to get more attention than it deserves; I should say only that it is usually hearty and

healthy, often a source of rich humor, never merely pornographic, but also at times unnecessary, forced to the point of nastiness. But the important issue is the whole attitude toward art and life; and the serious objection is that rawness is not the necessary sign of power, or violence of depth, or labor pains of sincerity, or messiness of mystery, or nakedness of truth—that, finally, there is no such thing in art as the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Despite his exaggerated indifference to Literature and fear of Art, Mr. Miller is a highly self-conscious writer of literature, and some of his virtuoso Surrealist performances even suggest artiness.

All this is indeed easy to say. Yet it is therefore too easy to overlook the value of Mr. Miller's attitudes. For those who cherish reason and reasonableness, his protest against modern society is not impertinent or merely quixotic. If his medicine would kill the patient, he is nevertheless attacking a real disease; his criticism of Proust and Joyce in "The Universe of Death," for example, reveals acute powers of diagnosis. Like Lawrence, at any rate, he forces us back to fundamentals, makes us clarify the premises of our faiths. But our immediate concern is again the individualized work of art, not the generalized philosophical or sociological footnote; and for the artist his attitudes have especial pertinence and value. The source of his limitations is as plainly the source of his strength.

However dangerous its implications, Mr. Miller's thought is from this point of view not perverse. It has been thoroughly earned, not merely learned; it is the product of his deepest experience. All the writers who have "influenced" him did not so much point out new directions as make him conscious of where he had already gone by virtue of his own peculiar genius. If his reaction against his society has carried him too far,

the impulse was nevertheless his deepest need as an artist and a man. His hymn to Life is accordingly whole-hearted through all its inconsistencies. At a time when there is so much worried rationalization, unhappy second thought, half-hearted faith, underlying fear of life or of death, he arrives through his negations at an impassioned Yea-saying: "The first word any man writes when he has found himself, his own rhythm, which is the life rhythm, is Yes!" One may disagree with the particular terms of Mr. Miller's Yes, as one may with Milton's argument for justifying the ways of God to man, or not know just what he means by Life in the abstract; but there is no questioning his imaginative and emotional power, or the flesh and blood of the life he creates. Few writers today seem so intensely alive.

As an artist he chiefly reminds me of Thomas Wolfe. Although the mighty America that struck Wolfe with awe is the epitome of all that Mr. Miller loathes—it is a huge cesspool, a slaughter-house, a monstrous death machine, and various unprintable metaphors—they are both American to the core, Mr. Miller never more plainly than in the furious energy and extravagance of his attacks upon his country. He is incidentally much like Wolfe in his original characterization, with its often grotesque detail; striking examples are "The Tailor Shop" from *Black Spring*, and the magnificent passages in *Tropic of Capricorn* dealing with his experience as personnel director of Western Union. In general he has the same immense appetite for experience, the feeling of wonder and awe, the teeming memory and blazing imagination, the gift of headlong eloquence. He also has much the same faults of fantastic excess; his picture of the true artist, who must "tear his hair with the effort to comprehend," "bellow like a crazed beast," "stand

up on the high place with gibberish in his mouth and rip out his entrails," is Eugene Gant to the life.] And they both write autobiography, the endless story of this very romantic artist, and write his emotions twice their size.

This comparison also throws into relief, however, some significant differences. I doubt that Mr. Miller will ever achieve the resonance of Wolfe's greatest scenes. I also doubt that he will ever lapse into anything as banal as *The Web and the Rock*. He has broader interests, more sophistication, a much more varied background of experience, but above all greater intellectual powers than Wolfe had, and therefore greater possibilities of self-discipline, detachment, and command. Although he is as egocentric, he knows his ego better, unlike Eugene Gant or George Webber, his hero emerges as a definite personality. And he is more apt to grow. I say this even though *Tropic of Capricorn*, Mr. Miller's latest work, is by all odds his most violent and obscene. Here the flood of his emotion is canalized by more specific ideas about what he hates in modern civilization and what the good life should be; hence it might at first rage all the more. But for the same reason his subsequent work may be more measured and restrained.

Conclu  
Gene



1940—1960

## HENRY MILLER IN AMERICA

IN 1940 war forced Miller back to America. After making his "air-conditioned nightmare" tour of the United States in 1941-42 and after living a while in New York and Los Angeles, he withdrew from the big cities to a primitive life in Big Sur. Here he found his Walden, and here his legend grew, especially after the war when the G.I.s bought his banned books in France. It had been growing all along, of course, with the publication of his books in America from 1939 on, and with his open letters about the plight of the creative artist in America in 1943-44. But it was as the sage of Big Sur that he became a legendary figure.

Lawrence Clark Powell, the librarian of the University of California at Los Angeles, his friend, neighbor and mainstay there, writes of Miller in the early forties. Powell not only instigated Miller's *Books in My Life* but established the Henry Miller Collection at UCLA to which all students of Miller's work are indebted. Another friend and neighbor, Walker Winslow, describes Miller as he appeared to him at Big Sur—an ordinary man, mild in speech and manner. Winslow, who is in turn described in *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, had gone to Big Sur to work in peace and solitude. His defense of the hard-working community of artists and writers was provoked by a superficial article in *Harper's*, "The New Cult of Sex and Anarchy."

As Miller's legend grew, so his literary reputation spread, chiefly through the quarterlies and little magazines. Of these *Partisan Review* followed his career most closely, though not always favorably. In 1939, *Partisan Review* sent a series of questions to Miller (along with a number of other American writers) and elicited a characteristic reaction: I have known nothing about America since

1930; Henry James for me is nil, Whitman is the greatest American writer; I have no use for criticism. Philip Rahv, one of the founding editors of *Partisan Review*, wrote two articles on Miller for the *New Republic* in the early forties and later combined them in the essay from *Image and Idea* included in this volume.

In England, Cyril Connolly published articles by Henry Miller and Alfred Perlès in early issues of *Horizon* in 1940. Some years later he invited Lawrence Durrell to write an essay on Miller in a series called "Studies in Genius." Durrell, an admirer and close friend of Miller since 1935, made the first serious attempt to survey Miller's work for the benefit of the British public, which at the time scarcely knew any of it. Miller's letter in response to Durrell's article (reprinted from the Durrell-Miller *Correspondence* with slight modifications) makes an interesting commentary.

Another English man of letters who had been in correspondence with Miller since the mid-thirties was Herbert Read. A poet and critic of extraordinary breadth, Sir Herbert has written voluminously on many subjects, among them three which suggest his interest in Henry Miller: surrealism, anarchy and prose style. More recently, Kenneth Rexroth, an American poet, critic and friend, has written a sympathetic article in *Nation*, which also appeared as the introduction to the first American paperback anthology of Henry Miller. And most recently, among the articles, theses and books about Miller that have begun to appear in profusion is a scholarly-critical study by Kingsley Widmer. Some of the material in the essay he wrote for this collection parallels the more detailed discussion in his book.

In the early 1940s Henry Miller was a relatively obscure avant-garde writer. By the time the *Tropics* were published in the United States, his name was widely known. During the twenty years that had intervened his work had become the subject of a considerable body of criticism. (It had also prompted a great deal of adulation on the one hand and vituperation on the other, but since neither seems very helpful, I have excluded both extremes.) There was no clear consensus among the critics. Or rather, they had a hard time coming to any conclusions about Miller. His gifts were unmistakable, but his use of them seemed uncontrolled. They admired some of his works but found others incoherent or tedious. They deplored not so much his language or subject matter as his lapses into cliché or bathos. They could not decide where he belonged or how

he should be regarded. Was he D. H. Lawrence incarnate or Laurence Sterne? Emerson or Whitman? a Good European or a 100% American? sheep or wolf? Miller of course did nothing to help matters. Probably he could not answer the questions himself, for when he tried he only added a few more: saint or charlatan? artist or egotist? sinner or preacher? The man himself seemed a chaos of contradictions. And the usual categories did not fit his work. The usual critical positions did not apply either. The New Critic found no sense of form. Freudian criticism seemed supererogatory. The social-political critic of the *Partisan Review* or *New Republic* variety was baffled when confronted by an obviously neglected but evidently unprincipled artist. It is not for me to resolve the dilemma. I do not presume to set the critics straight. The best I can do is to present the criticism that appears noteworthy with no apologies for the fact that it may also appear rather eclectic.

## THE MILLER OF BIG SUR

*Lawrence Clark Powell*

SOONER OR LATER everything comes in and goes out of a university library: books on French roulette and the dynamics of turbulent flow, on vector analysis and psychoanalysis, books of missals and on missiles, on flood and drought, law and disorder, books for and against, of good and evil, all free to all, a storehouse as powerful as any uranium stockpile, each volume awaiting the touch of hand, the sight of eye to release its energy.

Into this magnetic field there came one day in the spring of 1941 a small, erect man in conventional garb, carrying a checked cloth cap, who approached my desk and said, "I am Henry Miller. My publisher told me when I reached L. A. to go out to UCLA and see Larry Powell, a librarian who reads books.

"Guilty," I said. "And sometimes on company time."

"Do you have any books by Jakob Boehme?" was Miller's first question.

"We'll go into the stacks and see," I said.

So into the great central bookstack we went in search of the German shoemaker mystic of the 1600's, whose books influenced English mystical thought from William Penn to William Yeats. Our quest led us to the second underground level where, like an ore de-

posit, we found solid shelves of books on religion and philosophy, and one book in particular with a title Yeats thought one of the loveliest ever conceived—Boehme's *Aurora, or the Morning Redness in the Sky*.

I have never seen a man change so fast as Miller did when I put that book in his hand. He settled down on his haunches on the floor and began to leaf through it, read phrases, and talk more to himself than to me. Up to then he had been rather insignificant as a person; now he began to fill out and expand, to communicate and radiate energy.

“Somewhere in the Southwest I found myself wanting to read Boehme,” he said, “and of course there was no library en route that would even have heard of, much less have Boehme on its shelves. It is worse than being without water, not to have a book when you want it. When are you through work? Four-thirty? Good. Come back for me then and we’ll go out for a cup of coffee.”

So I left Henry Miller reading on the cold floor, and when I returned two and a half hours later, he was still there, like the Buddha, smiling and joyful. And in the years since then our friendship, rooted in mutual bookishness, has flourished like the coast live oak, green the year round.

We had met ten years earlier on the staircase in the Faculty of Letters of the University of Dijon, where I was a graduate student and he a teacher in the Lycée Carnot, suffering the exile from Paris so painfully described in *Tropic of Cancer*. Two people who passed on the stairs, neither making an impression on the other. No true meeting, perhaps because there were no books on the stairs.

During those years after his arrival in Los Angeles, Miller lived near us in Beverly Glen, a Bohemian backwater in the Santa Monica hills a mile from the

university. Commuting back and forth, I ran a book-mobile service for him, fascinated by the variety of his interests, dropping off a book about the headwaters of the Blue Nile, picking up one about the guild of medieval cathedral builders, today books on bristles and Balzac, tomorrow a biography of Colette or a book about Chartres. Either we had them or we got them for him, which is what a librarian is supposed to do.

We rendered a bit more than bibliographical service for Miller. *The Colossus of Maroussi*, his exuberant book about Greece, had appeared in the beautiful Colt Press format, and he wanted it translated into Greek. There was a Greek girl working in the library. When she and Miller met, it was combustion rather than translation that occurred.

When Miller moved to the Big Sur, we continued to give him help by mail. He made the library the depository for his manuscripts, papers, correspondence, and ephemeral publications, and there was commenced what has grown into the Henry Miller Archive, a vast collection documenting his transformation from Brooklyn intellectual to Paris Bohemian to world celebrity. Along with Mark Twain, Jack London, and Upton Sinclair, Henry Miller is one of the widest read of all American writers.

Books were ever and always the bond between us. One night when we were driving from his home on Partington Ridge to the nearest telephone fourteen miles down coast at Lucia, I asked Miller if he would write a piece on the importance of books and libraries in his life which I might have privately printed as a Christmas keepsake. He examined the idea with a few questions, punctuated by that characteristic meditative sound he makes—a cross between a groan, a grunt, and a sigh—and said he would have a try at it.

I returned to Los Angeles, and then I learned the way Miller works. An idea rises in him like the headwaters of a river, first the merest trickle, gradually increasing to brook to stream to river, and finally to confluence with the sea. A page or two arrived, a few more, a chapter, another, and then, page after page, chapter upon chapter, the torrential manuscript which was to become *The Books in My Life*.

I was appalled by the prospect of my private printing bill. Likewise Miller was troubled by the thought that I would print only a few copies of this work which, rightfully, should reach the widest possible audience.

“Would you mind,” he finally queried me, “if we made this manuscript available to my publisher as a regular trade edition?”

I got off my own hook by replying, “Good Lord, no!”

And so the book took shape and the mail sacks between Westwood and Big Sur bulged, as Miller asked for a thousand and one references and confirmations. I accepted the ultimate dedication of the book on behalf of the entire library staff, who toiled to keep the furnace stoked.

There is a dichotomy, but no contradiction, between Miller the writer and Miller the man, between the violence of his view of life as re-created in his prose and the gentle manner of his actual way of life. “Live like a lamb,” Flaubert said, “so that you can write like a lion.” This has been Henry Miller’s way, at least in the years I have known him. If he had not been fated otherwise, Miller would have made a good reference librarian, with a passion for knowledge, a sense of order, and a desire to communicate.

“Artesian” is an adjective I have always applied to Henry Miller—free-flowing, abundant, without need

of pumping. So many writers are stingy-dry, selfishly working their talent, giving out only when they are getting in. All the years I have known him, Miller has been generous to the point of prodigality, giving all to anyone in need, whether it was literary aid or the money in his pocket.

Passing by his place one day in the Glen, with our younger son Wilkie in the car with me, I stopped to see if Miller was in need of books. It was at the time of his "Open Letter" in the *New Republic*, calling for donations of money, food, and clothing, in return for which he would send the donor one of his water-color paintings. A variety of clothing arrived, including an incongruous tuxedo which Miller spread like a scarecrow on the picket fence.

We found him at his easel, and after an exchange of greetings he observed my son, age seven, eyeing pennies on the table.

"Like money?" Miller asked.

Bug-eyed, Wilkie nodded.

"Take those pennies then."

Wilkie carefully gathered them.

"Want more?" Miller persisted.

The child nodded his head.

Whereupon Miller began to light up and come to life. He turned his pockets out.

"If you like money, you shall have money," he cried, throwing coins on the table.

"Take it all!" and he swept the money into the lad's eager hands.

It added up to seventy-six cents. Wilkie, starry-eyed, ran outdoors. It was the most money he had ever had at one time.

"It's every cent I have in the world," Miller said to me. "A useless sum to me; a fortune to him."

After that Wilkie liked understandably to visit

Miller. Cash windfalls never recurred, but there was always some kind of abundance lavished on him by Miller. Keys, watches, colored shoelaces, all given in the spirit of, "You like it? Well then, take it!"

Carried over into the field of correspondence, this prodigality has become a problem to Miller, as people write to him from all over the world to ask help of various kinds. The problem is one of time. How apportion it between the needs of others and the need to write his own work? Too many people seek to go beyond a writer's work, fasten on the man himself, and suck him dry. Nevertheless at nearly seventy Henry Miller is still flowing, and I expect he always will be. He has a capacity for lasting friendships and with a variety of people such as the late Emil Schnell-  
lock, Anaïs Nin, Alfred Perlès, Lawrence Durrell, and his long-time publisher James Laughlin.

A meal at Henry Miller's is something of a religious ceremony, the food by candlelight, with Henry's outflow starting slowly, waxing stronger as the intake of food and drink warms the blood. He is one of the world's great talkers, and the greatest performances come at mealtime when the Staff of Life, the Meat and Wine, the Fruit and Cheese, have made the old master glow and radiate heat. Suddenly a key word triggers him and he launches on a *tour de speech* more pyrotechnical than any Royal Fireworks.

Once in the Glen, at a dinner cooked to perfection by my wife, the trigger word was *Marseilles*. Miller took it the way a trout takes a fly, and away he went, first talking at table, then rising and pacing the room, glass in hand, recalling the glories of France—people, food and drink, the river-sweet ambiance of Paris, talking several parts in turn, questions and answers, an antiphonal monologue, his own delight mounting as he saw the pleasure in the others' eyes, an essentially

impersonal performance, spokesman for life itself, focused and finding expression in the Boy from Brooklyn, the most original American writer since Walt Whitman and whose fame will eventually permeate his native land.

If an astrologer had told Henry Miller thirty years ago in Paris that the crowning years of his life would be spent on an isolated stretch of the Central California coast, he would have changed astrologers. Nothing seemed less likely. And yet it came to pass that in 1944 Miller quit smog-blighted Southern California for the clear air of the Sur Coast, settling eventually in a cottage on Partington Ridge, high above the wind-blown Pacific. Fifty miles north, on Carmel Bay, lives Robinson Jeffers, the greatest poet of his time. It seems to me no accident that these two writers should have been drawn to this wild and beautiful coast. I can very well understand the reason: it is a creative region, where strong forces are available to those with the necessary transformers.

There in the company of this vital man and his wife Eve, loving, beautiful, and wise, I have found surcease from too much city, eating by Millerlight, talking of life, love and learning—and of books, of course, those honeycombs of all three.

One need not go to Big Sur to partake of Henry Miller. There are his books, overflowing with the man himself, and immortal as man is not. The *Tropics* are generally unavailable in the lands of his native language, but enough has been legally published to satisfy readers' desire for writing that is strong, bold, personal, refreshing, and nourishing. Henry Miller belongs to the Unbeat Generation. Old-fashioned now, perhaps, yet joined with such outspoken men of good will as Rabelais, hands across the centuries, timeless, life-giving, and free.

## HENRY MILLER: BIGOTRY'S WHIPPING BOY

*Walker Winslow*

WHEN I read the articles and listen to the folklore that attempt to describe Henry Miller to America, I always think of the old story of several blind men trying to describe an elephant. "It's a snake," exclaims the horrified man who happens to grab the elephant's trunk. "No," argues the man at the tail, "it's a worm." "A veritable tower of strength," the man at one of the legs says in awe. "Because of these pendulous fins, it must be amphibious and even, perhaps, given to flight," declaims the man who has happened to touch an ear. A last man, unable to find any part of the beast, goes into a tantrum. "It's a demon taking you all in with its poses," he raves, "and nothing with an odor like that could be anything but obscene."

Since I became a neighbor and friend of Henry Miller's for a short time in 1946, I have felt constantly hallucinated when listening to people tell me all about a man whom I thought I knew. He has been described to me as a Communist, a Fascist, and an Anarchist. In every case it was made clear that he was highly placed in these parties. Stories of Henry Miller's immorality, licentiousness, and private pornographic output made him the lecher's Paul Bunyan.

Opinions about Henry Miller's writing were even more flabbergasting. If Henry, as a person, wasn't

readily available his books were for those who wanted to take the trouble to find them. But by word of mouth and in critical print he has been variously described as the satyr's Horatio Alger; the greatest literary genius of all time; a pornographic hack; a sexual emancipator; an expatriate snob; a mystic equal to Ramakrishna; a commercial failure snapping at the heels of his betters; a prose artist in the classic tradition; a surrealist flim-flammer; an anti-Semite; a lackey to the Jews; a panderer to the corrupt in the arts; and a great illuminator and educator. A more universal appraisal has rarely been given to any literary figure.

But was he a controversial figure? Hardly. He was what every person insisted he was. They would brook no controversy. Each mind that took over Henry Miller sealed him up in its own special necessity like a fly in amber. He was petrified in didactic pronouncements. I learned to listen in amazement, ponder in awe, and to remain silent. But I would find myself thinking of my friend Henry as I knew him.

Old friends of mine who learned that I had become a friend of Henry's nodded sadly. I had, they were sure, forsaken my former excessive drinking for excessive sexuality. Strangers stared at me as a specimen of "Henry Miller's Big Sur Sex Cult." People ran for my books, sure that they had discovered a pornographic disciple of Henry's, and then looked upon me as an impostor.

For those who have, through some miracle, missed the gossip about Henry Miller and his books, a word of explanation is in order. Though most of our own literary reviews wouldn't let you know about it, he is one of the American writers who is taken most seriously in Europe. He has been translated into most languages and his books have been distributed widely. In France, in particular, a mass of critical writing has

attended his work. But in America he has been greeted with jeers and insults.

One reason for his American status is that his most important books, *Tropic of Cancer*, *Black Spring*, *Max and the White Phagocytes*, *Tropic of Capricorn*, and *Sexus*, the first volume of a master work to be called *The Rosy Crucifixion*, were first published in France in English and forthwith banned from the English-speaking world because of alleged pornography. The dozen books and pamphlets published in America were of necessity removed from the text of Miller's total work and therefore much misunderstood.

At present there is a test suit being taken through the Federal Courts in an attempt to get Henry Miller's work admitted to America. While the amount of critical acclaim is equal to that which won Joyce entry to this country, the prejudice, based mainly on gossip, in print and out, has made Henry Miller the whipping boy for the public moralists. Against this, Henry Miller has a group of fans who, without any encouragement from him, have appointed him the Havelock Ellis of the precious. Between the prejudice and the sophomoric enthusiasm is the real Henry Miller who has won high recognition in world literature.

Here's how I happened to wander into the Miller environs. In 1946, when I badly needed the freedom to write a book, my friend, Emil White, the painter, generously gave me his studio near his Big Sur cabin, which is located on a wild stretch of central California coast just below Monterey. Emil was a sort of tenant landlord and had rehabilitated an old convict camp—the only space available to a poor man in Big Sur—into three rough dwellings besides his own. Just across the road, in one of these houses, lived some old friends of mine from Denver, Gilbert and Margaret

Neiman with their little daughter, Ariane. Gilbert was writing a novel. Further out on the cliff's edge was a small cabin occupied by Henry and Lepska Miller and their baby daughter, Valentine.

Whether I was simply in a lather to write, or whether Big Sur and its hard-working people inspired me, I do not know. I do know that the next four months were the most productive and the happiest of my life up to that time. Torrents of wild lilac broke into a frothy fume as they poured over the hills that jutted up behind the sparsely traveled highway. Massive cliffs inscribed a fractured and heroic script on a green sea, while seals and seabirds jeered forlornly. A great peace lay on the land. People and their enterprises got lost in ancient solitudes. There was very little social life as the city dweller would know it—no partying, little drinking. Life was about as Bohemian as the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Since we were forty-five miles from Monterey, and without radio or telephone, the arrival of the mailman three days a week was an event that brought us all together. The mailman brought all of our supplies as well as communications from our nearest neighbors miles up the coast. Except for Lillian Boss Ross, the historical novelist, and her husband, Harrydick Ross, the wood carver and forest ranger—two of the hardestiest pioneers I've ever known—most of our neighbors were farmers.

For two or three weeks my only meetings with Henry Miller were on mail days. We politely exchanged greetings, little more. I knew that he was working on a book and I respected his privacy just as he did mine. The only other times I saw him during this period were when I would look out of my window and see him pass up the highway with a laundry bag over his shoulder. Since I was pretty badly done in

physically at the time, I was envious of the abundant energy of this fifty-three year old man. He had the jauntiness of youth. Although his clothes were obviously hand-me-downs, they were immaculate and worn with the air of a man whose valet never makes a mistake.

How Henry and I struck up a conversation, I don't quite remember. Possibly I was out for my evening walk and we fell in beside each other. Instantly I knew that we were two of a kind. It was dangerous for either of us to become interested in another person, for we are both insatiably curious. In two days I could have become more interested in the book Henry was writing than in my own. But as it turned out, Henry was both the kinder and the wiser of the two. He became interested in my work without allowing me to become interested in his. From the first day onward our evening walks became habitual.

Henry insisted on reading what I had written. When he returned the manuscript to me all that he said was, "I don't know how you're fixed for money. But don't worry; there'll be food and shelter for you until that book is finished." Each day after that he made trips up the hill to catch pages of my book as they fell from the typewriter. Never once did he attempt to guide what I was doing. He wanted to find out what would happen, not make something happen. His actions seemed to me to be a universal design for friendship.

To describe Henry Miller is a difficult thing. From forty feet he is nondescript, a neat man of medium size and medium everything. He might be a retired civil service worker or the village barber. But let him start walking or talking and a change takes place; he sets the world about him into motion. He is at once a child seeing everything for the first time and a Lama just come down from a Tibetan monastery. In short,

he is the animation of curiosity and meditative reverence. This you sense even before getting in talking range.

Get closer and something else happens. You don't walk beside Henry, you are conveyed, practically levitated. His relish of the miraculous outburst of nature that is Big Sur seems to hoist you into a Sultan's howdah beside him. Like a potentate greeting his subjects, he bows left and right to the Big Sur flora and fauna. Cars pass unnoticed; a roar of planes overhead will not divert his attention from an interesting bug. I constantly had the feeling that he was on leave of absence from ancient Greece or China, pledged to observe in our day only those things that had eternal currency.

The eternally current things were the topics of our conversations. Never was there any gossip or mention of politics. Henry was deeply interested in the insane, among whom I had lived and worked, but totally incurious about modern diagnosis and treatment. Soon I realized that he was interested in insanity only as it revealed an extension of man's normal reality. If Henry had the slightest interest in sex, it was never revealed in any of our talks. My western speech, peppered with profanity, seemed vulgar alongside of his modulated Brooklyn accent—an accent at once vital and devoid of all profane and scatological decoration.

Having read *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, and feeling that some of the complaints Henry made about America in this book were justified, I once attempted to add some complaints of my own to his glossary of distaste for our culture. My attempt fell flat. Henry remarked that there were times when he couldn't understand his petulance about inconsequential things. He was more in a mood to convert the vulgar to better

uses than he was to attack it and slay it in its tracks. But evidence of revolt, or magical difference, in either Man or Nature entranced him as it did me. Henry's story of the horde of levitating saints that his friend, Blaise Cendrars, had unearthed while searching for a patron saint for aviation could, for example, set both of our imaginations free. Dusk would come down to find us both gesturing and expostulating some ninety feet above the earth. But Henry was the superior man, even at levitation. I have never known one who was so in love with the miraculous and yet so realistic about his own experience with it. What man imagined had one reality; man's circumscribed, materialistic productions had another.

Books weren't much discussed, but when they were I quickly learned to be temperate in my expectations of books Henry had described to me in detail. I remember a time when he grew enthusiastic about Franz Werfel's novel, *Star of the Unborn*. We were at the hot sulphur baths, a wonderful place to lounge in tubs out in the open air while your laundry soaked in other tubs. It was at these baths, incidentally, that I learned what Henry carried in the laundry bag. It was little Val's diapers which he washed and dried as he mused in the sun.

With the green sea and blue sky as a backdrop, and studying Val's diapers as if they contained a script, Henry launched into the story. As I lay back in my tub he denuded the planet and left it with the surface appearance of a mangy hound. Then he took me into the cave world of the men of the future. Life was endless, the aging process having been abolished. . . . A man was no longer telling a story; I was living in another world. When I arose from the tub an eternity or two later, I was suffering from immersion illness, estranged from the world I had to cope with. At once

I borrowed the book. What a letdown! Maybe it was a good book but it paled beside Henry's version. I had learned that Henry honored a story teller's intent more than he did his execution.

Some nights Lepska Miller would invite me to dinner. She's a young Polish girl, a sort of a Dresden figurine, but as energetic in her own way as Henry is in his. Although a scholar of no mean attainments, she is also immensely practical. Moreover, she is a splendid cook who can bake sound bread in a contraption most women would run from. As she worked with the meal she was always able to keep up with the conversation and add to it. At the same time Valentine would be getting her share of attention from both Henry and Lepska. The house was always immaculate. The walls were decorated with some of Henry's exuberant water colors, as well as the paintings friends had given him. In the studio behind the cabin, Henry was beginning to collect the first library he'd ever had. Often he would trot out to it for books that illustrated what he was discussing.

It was an odd thing to see a man in his mid-fifties, living in poverty and collecting the first fixtures of a home, much as a younger man might have. It was stranger still when you realized that he was a major figure in the international literary world, that books of his were translated into many tongues and selling well in most of them. In Europe not a half dozen writers of our day were more honored. And yet the food he was eating was often panhandled, just as it had been panhandled to sustain the independence that had created the books upon which his reputation was built. He was a man who had found his own way of getting bread that didn't poison the spirit and cramp the creative guts; an illustration that the beggar who knows why he begs has more independence and verve

than the millionaire who knows not why he stacks up money.

Money came out of Europe rarely. On one occasion when a large check did come, Henry had only enough left over after paying debts to buy a milkshake. But he drank it as if it were champagne. On a large sheet over his desk was a list of the people to whom he owed money and to which he added or subtracted as his luck might run. Henry not only repaid what he borrowed but kept right on paying until his benefactor said, "Stop." Moreover, his begging and borrowing skill was at the service of old friends who were in need. All of this, no doubt, kept Lepska on the jump, but it dispelled the myth Henry had created about himself that made you believe him capable of knocking the gold fillings out of his brother's teeth if the need arose. Or maybe there once had been a Henry like that.

Many people feel that Henry Miller strikes poses in his writings, making himself appear now at this and now at that stage of emancipation from the trivialities that plague us all. This many find infuriating—more infuriating even than Henry the gleeful beggar and misanthrope who seems to mock their circumscribed integrity and seriousness. But the Henry I know is, I assure you, much larger than his poses and far more humble than any of his pretenses would ever make you believe. What a listener, what a persevering seeker he is can only be known to those very close to him.

Simply because Henry has published books that are banned in this country and called pornographic, newspapers and hack writers have declared open season on him. These have also learned that Henry doesn't read the works of his detractors, much less answer them. The result has been some of the most bizarre stories ever to appear in disreputable newspapers and

reputable magazines. Those who have written about him have rarely, if ever, honored him with an interview; never have they done anything resembling research, such as consulting friends and neighbors about him and his way of life. I know, for I was in Big Sur at the time an article was being "prepared" for a reputable magazine. This article gave rise to a national myth that Henry was the leader of a sex cult. The only sex cult I saw him encourage was among the cats, and that only by feeding them into such a state of fertility that they nearly ate him out of house and home. Of course, when the magazine got by with this story the pack took up the cry.

Naturally, Henry could not help hearing about all of this. The publicity almost converted him into a national monument and devoured months of his time as he beat back the hordes of the sexually starved. Even at that he took the rather civilized attitude that what he knew about himself and what his friends and neighbors knew about him was what counted, and to hell with libel. I've always felt that it would be equally civilized and courteous if the editor of the magazine who got taken in with this piece would visit Big Sur and familiarize himself with the man and the country. Particularly he should talk to the farmers, road workers, and other neighbors who have known Henry during all of his Big Sur years. Thus he might assure himself that the letters of protest that followed the piece, and were never published, didn't come from "Millerite crackpots."

As I have said, I was only in Big Sur for four months in 1946. During that time I wrote a book that was well received critically but damned commercially by the salesmen of my publisher because it was lacking in sex. Up until that time I hadn't read much of Henry. Even if I had I doubt that he would have influenced me over to the side of the salesmen.

Out in the world, and with time on my hands, I began to read the works of the man whose friendship had meant so much to me. Somehow the man and the books matched up. Henry, the writer, could no more be dishonest about or neglect the least facet of sexual experience than he could, say, the experiences great books had given him. In the banned books the massive reference to, and the illumination of, the authors who have fed him outranges that in the work of any living author. No barren reference, this. A man who writes as he's lived, in the depths and the heights, gives these authors a sanction of life that they could not find elsewhere. I'd rather have my son learn about literature from Henry Miller than any of the "Great Book" lecturers. A man whose gusto for life encompasses all experience would, I am sure, evoke more trust in a boy.

My work has led me into institutions where I interviewed sex psychopaths and pornography-hungry constitutional inferiors. But I have yet to see one of these who would wade through an illumination of Dostoevski to get to a few four-letter words that were dinned into his ears hourly. The words Henry uses I have heard from childhood on, and so has almost every other adult. The acts he describes take place every instant on the instant in palaces and hovels and are of greater or lesser importance to the people to whom they happen. Some move like automatons, others like divine beings. Perhaps they act to shock us out of our lethargy and raise us toward Godliness. Certainly there is some significance to this part of man's life. If what Henry Miller writes is pornography, then every man's memory, containing as it does the sublime along with the slimy, should make each of us a candidate for the censor. Or have we already been censored at the expense of mental health and total reality?

What is more important to me than the sexual sections of Henry's books, which are but details, is the

exploration of life and man, especially man's possibilities in contrast to his usual dull surrender to all that is vulgar and spiritually incriminating in our civilization. The experience I got from my reading was that of being led down through the deepest and darkest shafts of the bowels of reality. Then there were swift passages back to the light, where the ore that had been mined from the depths was refined into a metal that men had long neglected. This was the metal with which we might forge implements for the cultivation of our *individual* lives. The metal I speak of was last touched in America by Thoreau, Emerson and Whitman.

"I have to die as a city in order to live as a man," is a line that occurs in *The Tropic of Capricorn*. To me this is the key to Henry's work. The city can be taken to mean all that is corrupt in our civilization. In the scenes that have been condemned you see the robot type of compulsive sexuality that arises out of lost individuality. Here sex is a desperate respite from poverty, regimentation, and competitive insanity—an impotent rage. Over all of this you sense that the writer is a partially resurrected figure who has begun to live like a man. He has a toe hold on freedom. He is free to mock the city and the creature he once was. Even when this man, this writer, seems to cling to the maggoty hive of the city because of the woman he loves, who is its captive, you sense that the seeds of emancipation are germinal. An odd specimen, this Henry Miller. He doesn't have to lead anyone. How could he? He doesn't even know where he is going himself.

In his *Book about Books*, soon to be published in this country as well as abroad, Henry explains some of this himself. "Of what stupendous, unimaginable detours are our lives composed," he says. "All is voyage, all is quest. We are not aware of the goal until we

reach it and become one with it. To employ the word reality is to say myth and legend. To speak of creation is to bury oneself in chaos. We know not whence we come nor whither we go, nor even who we are. We set sail for the golden shores sped on something like 'arrows of longing,' and we arrive at our destination in the full glory of realization—or else as unrecognizable pulp from which the essence of life has been squashed . . .”

Continuing on this theme, Henry explains something about the seeming cleavage between the man he was and what he has become. He is speaking of the woman he sought to commemorate: “In some strange, twisted way, having dedicated myself to the task of immortalizing her, I convinced myself that I was giving her Life in return for death. I thought that I could resurrect the past, thought I could make it live again—in *truth*. Vanity, vanity. All I accomplished was to reopen the wound that had been inflicted upon me. The wound still lives and with the pain of it the remembrance of what I was. I see very clearly that I was not this, not that. The ‘notness’ is much clearer than the ‘isness.’ I see the meaning of the long *Odyssey* I made; I recognize all of the *Circes* who held me in their thrall. I found my father, both the one in the flesh and the unnameable one. And I discovered that the father and son are one. More, immeasurably more, I found at last that all is one.”

Maybe the bus for Paradise starts from Goshen Junction, or Brooklyn, where Henry came from. But to join any “cult” Henry leads, each man is required to find his own starting point and then bitterly sort the fare from his own confusion.

As Henry Miller says, “We create no enigmas; we bury ourselves in them.” But, more than anyone I know, he has been buried not only in his own enigmas

but in the enigmas of his homeland as well. It is a rare person who can go directly to Henry Miller and his private enigmas as they show themselves in his books. Most must cut through fable and fancy, myth and legend, that have been superimposed upon him as a writer. We have not only banned his books but we have banned their meaning and their intent as well. More than that, we have tried to ban the dignity of the man who wrote them.

For some odd reason I was spared from prejudice against Henry before I met him. For this I am thankful, for I was open to such prejudices. As it is, I am enabled to return to Big Sur from time to time to see the man I know and the friend I have come to have. Henry owns his own home now and he and Lepska have added a boy to their family in spite of the poverty that still plagues them. In the midst of conventional neighbors who accept him wholeheartedly, Henry continues to be a revolutionist. But this revolution takes place within as he walks in the hills, or down the coast road to visit his friend Emil, or take a bath. Of this inner revolution Henry says, "The return to the source, the only revolution which has meaning for man, is the whole goal of man. It is a revolution that can occur only in his being. This is the true significance of the plunge into life's stream, of becoming fully alive, awakening, recovering one's complete identity." Further along, he adds, "We reveal nothing of ourselves by telling the truth, but we do sometimes *discover* ourselves. I who had thought to *give* found that I had *received* something."

I wish that I could call myself a fellow spirit of Henry Miller's! But I can't. My revolution too often collapses because the inner conformist in me is stronger than the rebel. But I can glory for a friend and defend that which needs no defense.

## SKETCHES IN CRITICISM: HENRY MILLER

*Philip Rahv*

IF Henry Miller's status in our literary community is still so very debatable, it is probably because he is the type of writer who cannot help exposing himself to extreme appraisals with every page that he adds to his collected works. He is easily overrated and with equal ease run down or ignored altogether. Consider his present situation. With few exceptions the highbrow critics, bred almost to a man in Eliot's school of strict impersonal aesthetics, are bent on snubbing him. What with his spellbinder's tone, bawdy rites, plebeian rudeness and disdain of formal standards, he makes bad copy for them and they know it. His admirers, on the other hand, are so hot-lipped in praise as to arouse the suspicion of a cultist attachment. They evade the necessity of drawing distinctions between the art of exploiting one's personality and the art of exploiting material, from whatever source, for creative purposes. And in Miller's case such distinctions are very much in order. His work is so flagrantly personal in content that in moments of acute irritation one is tempted to dismiss it as so much personality-mongering. Repeatedly he has declared that his concern is not with writing as generally understood but with telling the "more and more inexhaustible" story of his life—a story stretched to include a full recital of his opinions, philosophic

rhapsodies, intuitions, hunches, and buffooneries. All too often he plunges into that maudlin boasting of the ego to which the bohemian character is generically disposed. Yet at his best he writes on a level of true expressiveness, generating a kind of all-out poetry, at once genial and savage.

Unfortunately, since finishing off his expatriation and returning to his native country he has given more and more free rein to his worst tendency, that of playing the philosopher on a binge and the gadabout of the California avant-garde. The last book of his in which his great talent is shown to best advantage is *The Colossus of Maroussi*, published in 1941. It is a travel book on Greece of a very special type. Though containing some plain information about the country and its inhabitants, it intrinsically belongs to the modern tradition of the fugitives from progress—from the lands ravaged by the machine, the salesman, and the abstract thinker—the tradition of Melville and Gauguin in Tahiti and D. H. Lawrence in Mexico and Taos. Miller went to Greece to purge himself of his long contact with the French and to make good his hope for spiritual renewal. “In Greece,” he writes, “I finally achieved coordination. I became deflated, restored to proper human proportions, ready to accept my lot and to give of all that I have received. Standing in Agamemnon’s tomb I went through a veritable rebirth.” He speaks of the Greeks as “aimless, anarchic, thoroughly and discordantly human,” thus identifying them closely with his own values; and though confessing that he never read a line of Homer, he none the less believes them to be essentially unchanged.

Where he shows an unusual aptitude for descriptive prose is in the account of his visits to Mycenae, Knossus, Phaestos, and other sites of antiquity. Some of the passages are very good examples of his rhetorical

prowess. Hyperbolic statement is his natural mode of communication, yet he has a vital sense of reference to concrete objects and symbols which permits him to gain a measure of control over his swelling language. He is particularly addicted to using terms and images drawn from science, especially biology and astronomy; and his unvarying practice is to distribute these borrowings stylistically in a manner so insinuating as to produce effects of incongruity and alarm. It is a device perfectly expressive of his fear of science and all its works. For Miller belongs to the progress-hating and machine-smashing fraternity of contemporary letters, though lacking as he does the motive of allegiance to tradition, it is open to question whether his co-thinkers would ever assent to his company. Of late, too, he has increasingly yielded to his mystical leanings, and his mysticism is of the wholesale kind, without limit or scruple. Thus there is a curious chapter in *The Colossus of Maroussi* describing his interview with an Armenian soothsayer in Athens, who confirms Miller in his belief that he is never going to die and that he is destined to undertake missions of a messianic nature that will "bring great joy to the world." Now this is the sort of thing that can be taken, of course, either as a fancy piece of megalomania or as a legitimate aspiration to which every human being is entitled.

But if Miller's recent work has been disappointing, the one way to recover a sense of his significance is to go back to his three early novels—*Tropic of Cancer*, *Black Spring*, and *Tropic of Capricorn*. These novels are autobiographical, and he appears in them in the familiar role of the artist-hero who dominates modern fiction. Where he differs from this ubiquitous type is in the extremity of his destitution and estrangement from society. Reduced to the status of a lumpen-

proletarian whom the desolation of the big city has finally drained of all illusions and ideals, he is now an utterly declassed and alienated man who lives his life in the open streets of Paris and New York.

In these novels the narrator's every contact with cultural objects serves merely to exacerbate his anarchic impulses. There no longer exists for him any shelter from the external world. Even the idea of home—a place that the individual can truly call his own because it is furnished not only with his belongings but with his very humanity—has been obliterated. What remains is the fantasy of returning to the womb, a fantasy so obsessive as to give rise to an elaborate intra-uterine imagery as well as to any number of puns, jokes, imprecations, and appeals.

It is precisely in his descriptions of his lumpen-proletarian life in the streets that Miller is at his best, that his prose is most resonant and alive—the streets in which a never ending array of decomposed and erratic phenomena gives his wanderings in search of a woman or a meal the metaphysical sheen of dream and legend. In every shopwindow he sees the "sea-nymph squirming in the maniac's arms," and everywhere he smells the odor of love "gushing like sewer-gas" out of the leading mains: "Love without gender and without lysol, incubational love, such as the wolverines practice above the treeline." In these novels food and sex are thematically treated with such matter-of-fact exactitude, with such a forceful and vindictive awareness of rock-bottom needs, that they cease to mean what they mean to most of us. Miller invokes food and sex as heroic sentiments and even generalizes them into principles. For the man who is down and out has eyes only for that which he misses most frequently; his condition makes of him a natural anarchist, rendering irrelevant all conventions, moral

codes, or any attempt to order the process of experience according to some value-pattern. The problem is simply to keep alive, and to that end all means are permissible. One turns into a desperado, lurking in ambush in hallways, bars, and hotel rooms in the hope that some stroke of luck will enable one "to make a woman or make a touch." He literally takes candy from babies and steals money from prostitutes. As for obtaining regular work, he was always able "to amuse, to nourish, to instruct, but never to be accepted in a genuine way . . . everything conspired to set me off as an *outlaw*."

The fact that the world is in a state of collapse fills him with deep gratification ("I am dazzled by the glorious collapse of the world") because the all-around ruin seems to justify and validate what has happened to him personally. His particular adjustment he accomplishes by accepting the collapse as a kind of apocalyptic show from which the artist who has been rejected by society, and whose role is to revive the primeval, chaotic instincts, might even expect to gain the resurgence of those dreams and myths that the philistines have done their utmost to suppress. It is senseless to interfere, to try to avert the catastrophe; all one can do is to recoil into one's private fate. "The world is what it is and I am what I am," he declares. "I expose myself to the destructive elements that surround me. I let everything wreak its own havoc with me. I bend over to spy on the secret processes to obey rather than to command." And again: "I'm neither for nor against, I'm neutral. . . . If to live is the paramount thing, then I will live even if I become a cannibal." And even in his own proper sphere the artist is no longer free to construct objective forms. He must abandon the "literary gold standard" and devote himself to creating biographical

works—human documents rather than “literature”—depicting man in the grip of delirium.

And Miller's practice fits his theory. His novels do in fact dissolve the forms and genres of writing in a stream of exhortation, narrative, world-historical criticism, prose-poetry and spontaneous philosophy, all equally subjected to the strain and grind of self-expression at all costs. So riled is his ego by external reality, so confused and helpless, that he can no longer afford the continual sacrifice of personality that the act of creation requires, he can no longer bear to express himself implicitly by means of the work of art as a whole but must simultaneously permeate and absorb each of its separate parts and details. If everything else has failed me, this author seems to say, at least this book is mine, here everything is fashioned in my own image, here I am God.

This is the meaning, I think, of the “biographical” aesthetic that Miller at once practiced and preached in his early work and which an increasing number of writers, though not cognizant of it as a program, nevertheless practice in the same compulsive manner, not necessarily for reasons as personal as Miller's or with the same results, but because the growing alienation of man in modern society throws them back into narcissistic attitudes, forces them to undertake the shattering task of possessing the world that is now full of abstractions and mystifications through the instrumentality of the self and the self alone. Not “Know Thyself!” but “Be Yourself!” is their motto. Thomas Wolfe was such a writer, and his career was frustrated by the fact that he lacked sufficient consciousness to understand his dilemma. Miller, on the other hand, was well aware of his position when writing his early fictions. Instead of attempting to recover the lost relation to the world, he accepted his alienated status

as his inexorable fate, and by so doing he was able to come to some kind of terms with it.

If freedom is the recognition of necessity, then what Miller gained was the freedom to go the whole length in the subversion of values, to expose more fully perhaps than any other contemporary novelist in English the nihilism of the self which has been cut off from all social ties and released not only from any allegiance to the past but also from all commitments to the future. The peculiarly American affirmation voiced by Whitman was thus completely negated in Miller. Total negation instead of total affirmation! No wonder that like Wolfe and Hart Crane and other lost souls he was continually haunted by Whitman as by an apparition. In *Tropic of Cancer* he speaks of him as "the one lone figure which America has produced in the course of her brief life . . . the first and last poet . . . who is almost undecipherable today, a monument covered with rude hieroglyphs for which there is no key." And it is precisely because he had the temerity to go the whole length that Miller is important as a literary character, though his importance, as George Orwell has observed, may be more symptomatic than substantial, in the sense that the extreme of passivity, amorality, and acceptance of evil that his novels represent tends to demonstrate "the impossibility of any major literature until the world has shaken itself into a new shape."

In all his books Miller apostrophizes the Dadaists, the Surrealists and the seekers and prophets of the "marvelous," wherever they may be found. Perhaps because he discovered the avant-gardists so late in life, he is naive enough to take their system of verbal ferocity at its face value and to adopt their self-inflationary mannerisms and outcries. At the same time he likes to associate himself with D. H. Lawrence,

who was not at all an avant-gardist in the Parisian group sense of the term. He apparently regards himself as Lawrence's successor. But the truth is that they have very little in common, and there is no better way of showing it than by comparing their approaches to the sexual theme.

Miller is above all morally passive in his novels, whereas Lawrence, though he too was overwhelmed by the alienation of modern man, was sustained throughout by his supreme gift for moral activity; and he was sufficiently high-visioned to believe that a change of heart was possible, that he could reverse the current that had so long been running in one direction. Hence his idea of sexual fulfillment as a means of reintegration. Miller, however, in whose narratives sex forms the main subject-matter, presents sexual relations almost without exception in terms of fornication, which are precisely the terms that Lawrence simply loathed. The innumerable seductions, so casual and joyless, that Miller describes with such insistence on reproducing all the ribald and obscene details, are almost entirely on the level of street encounters. He has none of Molly Bloom's earthiness, nor does he ever quake with Lawrence's holy tremors. He treats erotic functions with a kind of scabrous humor, for there is scarcely any feeling in him for the sex-partner as a human being. What he wants is once and for all to expose "the conjugal orgy in the Black Hole of Calcutta." Not that he is open to the charge of pornography; on the contrary, behind his concentration on sexual experience there is a definite literary motive, or rather a double motive: first, the use of this experience to convey a sense of cultural and social disorder, to communicate a nihilist outlook, and second, an insatiable naturalistic curiosity. It is plain that Miller and Lawrence are opposites rather than twins.

Miller's claims as a guide to life and letters or as a prophet of doom can be easily discounted, though one remembers an essay by him on Proust and Joyce, called "The Universe of Death," which is a truly inspired piece of criticism. In his three novels, however, he is remarkable as the biographer of the hobo-intellectual and as the poet of those people at the bottom of society in whom some unforeseen or surreptitious contact with art and literature has aroused a latent antagonism to ordinary living, a resolve to escape the treadmill even at the cost of hunger and degradation. In dealing with this material, Miller has performed a new act of selection. There is in his fiction, also, a Dickensian strain of caricature which comes to the surface again and again, as in the riotously funny monologues of the journalists Carl and Van Norden in *Tropic of Cancer*. The truth is that his bark is worse than his bite. He strikes the attitudes of a wild man, but what he lacks is the murderous logic and purity of his European prototypes. Though he can be as ferocious as Céline, he is never so consistent; and the final impression we have of his novels is that of a naturally genial and garrulous American who has been through hell. But now that he has had a measure of recognition and has settled down at home to receive the homage of his admirers he seems to have entered a new phase, and his work only occasionally reminds us of the role of bohemian desperado which in his expatriate years he assumed with complete authority and conviction.

1940-42

## STUDIES IN GENIUS: HENRY MILLER

*Lawrence Durrell*

AN INVITATION to give some account of the writings of Henry Miller comes very appositely since I have just completed a rereading of all his available work with a view to making a representative selection from it for his American publishers. On the other hand I should make it clear at once that my own association and friendship with him has, in the opinion of many common friends, made me over-indulgent to what they consider his defects as a writer. I rate him too highly, they tell me. He lacks all sense of form . . . ("They say I must have form, blast them," writes D. H. Lawrence somewhere. "They mean their own miserable skin-and-grief form"). Miller, in the same context, replied to a criticism of mine thus: "You keep bellyaching about form. I'm against the form that's imposed from the outside, the dead structure. My books represent germination in all its phases."

"Germination," the word is a key to many of the intentions of Miller in his writings; it is the key to what Miller feels himself to be—a fecundating force expressing itself through writing, not a "literary man" or an "artist." The distinction is worth underlining for the shape and colour of this writer's work is dictated by his attitude to art and the world of which that art is a reflection.

There seem to be two distinct types of creative man. The first controls his material and shapes it. The second delivers himself over, bound hand and foot to his gifts. The first belongs to the family of Pope, the second to the family of Lawrence, of Blake. With this second type of artist it is useless to agitate for measure, form, circumspection. They are entirely mantic, delivered over to their pneuma. It is very exasperating, for almost any one of us talented fellows could show Blake how to improve his work, or Lawrence how to achieve the form he lacked with the artificial aid of a blue pencil. But we should then be guilty, I have no doubt, of missing the whole meaning and content of the work of such artists—for the meaning resides not only in the work as a whole unit, but also in the life of its creator, and in the struggle that went into the making of the work. Unless we are prepared to admit that this type of creative man is *making use* of his art in order to grow by it, in order to expand the domains of his own sensibility, we will be unable to profit by what he has to offer us, which is the vicarious triumph of *finding ourselves* in reading him. The imperfections of his art come from an honourable admission that he wishes to grow. He does not wish to sever the umbilical cord connecting him to his creation. He wraps himself more and more deeply in the coloured cocoon of his personal mythology until it is quite impossible for you to do more than reject him utterly, or accept him unreservedly. With the other type of artist, the great formalist who resides in a Joyce or a Proust, you find another attitude—that of the embalmer. Such artists are tied to a memory, to location, to a precise age and cultus. They condense and refine. They sum up their lives in a great complete metaphor from one determined standpoint. They are the real artists, says a friend, while the others are

“adventurers in literature” properly speaking, whose topic is growth, efflorescence, being. This may well be true. Certainly the latter type of artist makes a greater demand upon us. We have to accustom ourselves to his tone of voice, which is often irritating or unpleasant. Yet in an age where our literature is coming more and more to resemble an exchange of common-room debating-points wrapped in impeccable prose or verse, the work of such hungry time-spirits as Miller and Lawrence has a very special function. The new psyche of the age will be born of their desperate struggles, one feels. Merit and defect are somehow irrelevant to their work. What matters is the personality, the key, the tone of voice. They remind us that literature is something more than an electric massage for the over-educated ego, or a formal garden in which the critic can take his Peke for a run. It is a wilderness in which one can find or lose oneself, and where the object of creation is not only to produce “works of art” but to become more and more oneself in doing so.

The comparison of Lawrence and Miller is inevitable. Despite many differences of temperament and talent there are several points of reference worth noting. They both belong to the generation which, under the influence of Bergson and Spengler, opted for a vitalist view of history, and an anti-intellectual metaphysic. One makes such ascriptions light-heartedly enough in critical essays—but here I would like to emphasize that for the creative man the whole world of philosophic or religious ideas is simply a sort of harem from which he chooses now this pretty concubine, now that. We say that X is Theosophist or a Bergsonian: but it would be very difficult to criticize his work entirely in terms of either proposition. Readers of Mr. Louis MacNeice’s excellent study of Yeats will perhaps remember the closing chapters in

which the author confesses to a certain bewilderment at the *inconsistency* of his subject. The truth is that the artist is at his most amoral when he reaches the domain of ideas. He is concerned, of course, not with the dialectical truth of ideas, but simply with their beauty and appositeness to his own temperamental make-up. He chooses often exactly the *opposite* of what he is, simply in order to provide a counterbalance to his own over-balanced sensibility. Yeats felt an almost sensual attraction for the calm of the Indian sages. His own rosy, romantic Irish sensibility needed something of the sort to contain its disorders. With this reservation in mind one might ascribe Miller's intellectual pedigree partly to Bergson and Spengler, partly to Freud, and partly to Hindu and Chinese religion. Certain elements are easier to isolate than others. The following quotations from *The Hamlet Letters* outline his attitude more clearly than I could do.

It's your marvellous analytic mind which will not rest content until the subject has been torn to tatters . . . You must take it between your fingers, metaphorically speaking, and rend it to bits . . . You are like a savage who takes the watch apart to find out what makes it go, but like the savage again you neither find out what makes it go nor can you put the watch together again. You are left with a beautiful piece of destruction on your hands—a capable job, but what avail? Listen, *must* we know what makes the watch go? Isn't it enough to know what time it is? . . . Of course I am against the known . . . When you say that Knowledge is my great Bugaboo, you are absolutely right. But to go on and say that I detest science, metaphysics, religion, etc.—sticking one's finger into the Unknown, as you say—because I might bring up something horrible, *the truth*, that is not true. The fact is that truth is not arrived at that way. The exploration of the unknown yields only the

known. We discover only what we set out to find, nothing more. Truth on the other hand comes instantaneously, without search. *Truth is*, as Krishnamurti says. You don't win it. It comes to you as a gift, and to receive it you must be in the proper state. All this is nonsense to you, I know . . . It's just a piece of mysticism, if you like, which keeps me gay and fit. The unknown is constant and the advances we make into it are illusory. I love the unknown precisely because it is a "beyond," because it is impenetrable.

The surrender to the flux of individual life; the life which marks the history of individual and nation alike, is an article of faith with both Miller and Lawrence; and in both of them we see, over and over again, the attempt to emphasize the creative rebirth of the *individual*, and the rise of the human spirit to full consciousness. That both share a didactic purpose goes without saying. Their work offers us what is really a religious message. To be reborn with every breath one draws and every line one writes, suggests the spiritual athletic of the mystic rather than the patient and prescient interest of an artist in a form determined, in a tract of experience digested and finished with.

Suddenly your whole life seems like a grand eclipse; the sun was blacked out and you had never imagined that there was a sun but only this black spot in front of your eyes, only you yourself and your idea of life. Then suddenly the cataract is removed, and suddenly you see . . . The labour of putting two and two together you leave to the blind . . . When a man gets this sight havoc seizes the world. The philosophers and the historians may say that the time is not ripe—the time is never ripe for the historians and philosophers, except in the past—but the man who suddenly sees announces the time and the time is always ripe because it is one with his vision. To break this man, to destroy this vision, requires centuries and centuries of future time. And even

then the vision is never completely destroyed. Another man arises and it is the same vision. No time for writing books, no time for building philosophies. The man simply says what he sees and goes straight to his death. He walks seeing and saying, each step he makes, each word he utters a clear, clean break with the past. He has no memory, no hope, no regrets. Neither has he wife nor friends. Nor has he loyalty. He moves straight on with ice-cold compassion, the supreme master of irony, the chief actor in the drama of man. When we attempt to describe the pattern of such a life we create a spider-web in which we are strangled . . .

Man has a pattern but he seldom lives according to it. Man's pattern is God, but he refuses to recognize it as a creation . . . Man oscillates between God and the Devil. He is seldom man . . .

Man is a creator. And to create means to destroy at the same time. To destroy usually gives us pleasure but to create produces a sense of guilt. Why? Because to create entails responsibility. We create out of a sense of insufficiency. Our longing to be understood is only a reflection of our fear of trespassing. A creative act is in the nature of a trespass. It is a violation of the static order of things. We say we want to be understood, but in reality it is the anticipation of war which makes us tremble with joy and apprehension. Every creative act is a declaration of war. And war is man's pattern.

But the Heraclitean proposition expresses a paradox: that it is only by the acceptance of the war, the reconciliation of the warring selves, that the individual ever reaches the road to peace in the self. This rare understanding of the problem gives Miller's work a less scolding rancorous quality than that of Lawrence; he is temperamentally a larger man and consequently less hard on himself and the world; he takes time off to develop his comic gifts; he devotes a great deal of his time to buffoonery which irritates the "serious reader."

But his intentions are very strictly honourable in all that he does, while an essential childishness of spirit makes him rather enjoy being caught in awkward or ridiculous positions. In Lawrence's work the gradual curve towards self-reconciliation as man and artist was not completely carried out. His death cut him off at perhaps the most important stage in his career if we are to judge the temper of stories like *The Man Who Died* and poems like *The Ship of Death*, which breathe an entirely new air of calm and relaxation: as if every rancour and every disenchantment had suddenly given place to a new understanding of the artist's role. It is this core of self-realization which Miller has had time to examine and develop, and which forms the theme of his latest work and much that he promises us for the future; like Lawrence, however, he values art as a method of self-realization, not as an end in itself. ("I always say: Art For My Sake," barks Lawrence somewhere.) Miller writes:

Concerning every bold act one may raise the reproach of vulgarity. Everything dramatic is in the nature of an appeal, a frantic appeal for communion. Violence, whether in deed or speech, is an inverted sort of prayer . . . Initiation itself is a violent process of purification and union. Whatever demands radical treatment demands God, and always through some form of death or annihilation. Whenever the obscene crops out one can smell the imminent death of a form. Those who possess the highest clue are not impatient, even in the presence of death; the artist in words, however, is not of this order, he is only at the vestibule, as it were, of the palace of wisdom . . . When he fully understands his role as creator he substitutes his own being for the medium of words.

The artist, then, is not for Miller the supreme figure of the age. He is only a stage towards a fuller self-

realization—a self-realization which he can only reach by coming to terms with himself as a man.

I have avoided so far any reference to the obscenity of Miller's writings, because I was anxious to establish his *bona fides* as a serious practitioner of the arts in order to present, if possible, a fairly proportioned picture. For the average reader in England he is, of course, a "banned writer," a little of whose work is available in bowdlerized collections. The problem which faces a critic of Miller is to give some idea of his comparative stature to a public which has so far only seen one hundredth part of his work. (How would one indicate the stature of Stendhal to a public which was only allowed to read, say, *Armance* and *La Vie De Henry Brulard*?) Miller's main line of development runs through *Tropic of Cancer*, *Black Spring*, *Tropic of Capricorn*, and *The Rosy Crucifixion* (the first volume of which, containing nearly a thousand pages of prose, is due to appear in Paris this spring). So far in England and the U. S. A. the public has had to remain content with a few collections of essays, short stories and excerpts—which give a more muddled impression of Miller's work than is really necessary. Much of the work in these collections is good, of course; but the best of it represents Miller's peripheral activities rather than his main task—which is a seven-volume autobiography. Inasmuch as his main task is only half-done, then, he is entitled to the suspended judgement of his critics—and of those who level against his work the charge of formlessness. The connecting line of development in Miller's work may not yet be clear—the line which is to link them into a single autobiographic whole. One thing is certain: he will not follow a line based upon times, events or characters. Organization of moods and ideas must be the key to his work. Yet already the span between

*Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn* covers a tremendous revolution in ideas. The fleshly struggle which rages in his first book, has been transferred to the metaphysical plane in his third; the battlefield is no longer the flesh but the spirit. Bergson and Spengler have given way to the Chinese and the Hindus, so to speak. Even his use of obscenity as a technique has radically altered.

It is difficult to deal with the question of obscenity in art partly because of the pusillanimity of the Anglo-Saxon reading public, and partly because of that queer deficit in personal experience which makes the Anglo-Saxon somehow emotionally stunted, however intellectually capable he may be. This quality makes him over-value obscenity. He cannot simply look it in the eye. He must be for or against it—and both points of view are wrong in the eyes of Miller. The truth is that one should not, in a civilized country, have to make a case for obscenity in literature at all, to treat it as Something Awfully Serious which can, however, be Intellectually Justified. The Anglo-Saxon would like someone, please, to Make A Case for the obscenity, so that he can enjoy it without feeling guilty. Lawrence supplied such a demand in *Lady Chatterley* by making out a romantic and puritanical case for obscenity; his public was able to agree that sex was really a Sacrament, and that his gamekeeper was somehow an Important Symbol. The moral justification simply had to be there. The distinction between *Tropic of Cancer* and *Lady Chatterley* centres about this point—for Miller (who, unlike Lawrence, has thoroughly assimilated Freud) recognizes that sex is *both* a sacrament *and* also uproariously funny (not to mention silly, holy, and tiresome all in one); and that to tidy it into part of a moral scheme is simply to shackle the reader more and more firmly into his

puritanism. He has mastered, in fact, the great discovery of the age—ambivalence in values—and that is what lifts most of his work above the ruck of ordinary writing.

The most insistent question put to the writer of obscene literature is: why did you have to use such language? The implication is, of course, that with conventional terms or means, the same effect might have been obtained. Nothing . . . could be farther from the truth. . . . Effects are bound up with intentions and these in turn are governed by laws of compulsion as rigid as nature's own. That is something which non-creative individuals seldom understand . . . There will always be a gulf between the creative artist and public because the latter is immune to the mystery inherent in and surrounding all creation. Putting to one side all questions of ego and temperament, and taking the broadest view of the creative process, which makes of the artist nothing more than an instrument, we are nevertheless forced to conclude that the spirit of the age is the crucible in which, through one means or another, certain vital and mysterious forces seek expression . . . When obscenity crops out in art, in literature more particularly, it usually functions as a technical device; the element of the deliberate which is there has nothing to do with sexual excitation, as in pornography. If there is an ulterior motive it is one that goes far beyond sex. Its purpose is to waken, to usher in a sense of reality . . .

For those, then, who are on the look-out for the moral justification behind this literary practice, these words should prove of interest. Miller would like morality to be, not simply a barren code of observance, of behaviour, but a genuine reflection of the human spirit. And in a paradoxical sort of way his attack on the proprieties is an attack upon prudery, and as such an invitation to reconsider morality, to revalue it. It is no use just acting good, he says in effect, that is too

easy. The problem is how to *be* good. The use of obscenity, then, has something like a religious function for Miller—and indeed his attitude to the four-letter words reminds one of the “unpronounceable word” in the Jewish religion—the “mikvah”—which is at one and the same time the worst obscenity, and the holiest of holy words.

Once the artist has made use of his extraordinary powers, and I am thinking of the use of obscenity in just such magical terms, he is inevitably caught up in a stream of forces beyond him. He may have begun by assuming that he could awaken his readers, but in the end he himself passes into another dimension of reality wherein he no longer feels the need to force an awakening. His rebellion over the prevalent inertia about him becomes transmuted, as his vision increases, into an acceptance and understanding of an order and harmony which is beyond man’s conception and approachable only through faith . . . Ultimately, then, he stands among his own obscene objurgations, like the conqueror amidst the ruins of a devastated city . . . He knocked to awaken, but it was himself he awakened. And once awake he is no longer concerned with the world of sleep; he walks in the light, and, like a mirror, reflects his illumination in every act.

The statement is a challenging one, and one which removes Miller at a distance from Lawrence—whose ambition was simply to restore some of the flowering warmth of happy and candid sexual relations to the stunted Anglo-Saxon publics; yet both saw very clearly that the death of our world is bound up very tightly with the dying sexuality, the dying ego of Western man. “Once the obscene is accepted,” writes Miller, “whether as a figment of the imagination or as an integral part of human reality, it inspires no more dread or revulsion than could be ascribed to the flower-

ing lotus which sends its roots down into the mud of the stream on which it is borne."

"A well read man," writes Proust, "will at once begin to yawn with boredom when anyone speaks to him of a new 'good book,' because he imagines a sort of composite of all the good books that he has read and knows already, whereas a good book is something special, something incalculable, and is not made up of the sum of all previous masterpieces but of something which the most thorough assimilation of every one of them would not enable him to discover."

Alas! The proposition is all too true. The middle talent is not so difficult to assess. It is the outsize writer, the phenomenon, who is a difficult fish to hook! And in the case of Miller it is doubly difficult because he himself, splashing and floundering in the mystical menstrum of sensation and memory, does very little to help the critic or the public. Here and there he writes very badly; and being deficient in critical sense he often publishes pieces of work which are below his highest level simply in order to get them off his chest. Nearly everything written in dispraise of him is true—though unfortunately he has nearly always fallen upon critics with axes to grind. Mr. Orwell, for example, whose fluent and delightful prose has won him a deservedly wide public, has outlined a number of serious holes in the Miller chain-mail; he has a perfect right to the defects, but one must insist on a more balanced picture of Miller the artist. It is possible after all to have serious religious or moral intentions and not be a political man. And Miller's refusal to interest himself in the betterment of the world by planned economy and legislation may come from a perfectly serious conviction that the world cannot be improved that way; that it can best be improved by the self-improvement of the individual. It must be ad-

mitted, however, that Miller rather enjoys giving a picture of himself which suggests something between a crook, a cowboy and a clown; it is really his own fault if the critic takes fright at the picture he presents of a ruthless, anti-social and unmoral desperado. This Faustian vein in Miller is, however, a source of considerable amusement to his friends who know him to be the most gentle, most considerate and honourable of men. Indeed his fundamental generosity and warm-heartedness make him appear very ill-equipped to play Mephistopheles; and while he is an enchanter, to be sure, his true pedigree stretches back through Prospero to Merlin. But the vein of irresponsible naïveté in his nature makes him easy enough game on occasion.

Some account of his life, and his writing in relation to it, deserves a place in this study.

He was born in New York City on 26 December 1891 of poor parents. He was transplanted to Brooklyn at the age of one, and spent his early life in the streets of this poor quarter of New York. He has re-created the scene magnificently in several places, but best of all in *Black Spring*:

To be born in the street means to wander all your life, to be free. It means accident and incident, drama, movement. It means, above all, *dream*. A harmony of irrelevant facts which gives your wanderings a metaphysical certitude. In the street you learn what human beings really are; otherwise, or afterwards, you invent them. What is not in the open street is false, derived, that is to say, *literature* . . .

In my dreams I come back to the 14th Ward as a paranoiac returns to his obsessions. When I think of those steel-grey battleships in the Navy Yard, I see them lying there in some astrologic dimension in which I am the gunnersmith, the chemist, the dealer in high explo-

sives, the undertaker, the coroner, the cuckold, the sadist, the lawyer and contender, the scholar, the restless one, the jolt-head and the brazen-faced.

Where others remember of their youth a beautiful garden, a fond mother, a sojourn at the seashore, I remember, with a vividness as if it were etched in acid, the grim soot-covered walls and chimneys of the tin-factory opposite us, and the bright circular pieces of tin that were strewn in the street, some bright and gleaming, others rusted, dull, copperish, leaving a stain on the fingers; I remember the iron-works where the red furnace glowed and men walked towards the glowing pit with huge shovels in their hands, while outside were the shallow wooden forms like coffins with rods through them on which you scraped your shins or broke your neck. I remember the black hands of the iron-moulder, the grit that had sunk so deep in the skin that nothing could remove it—not soap nor elbow grease nor money nor love nor death. Like a black mark on them! Walking into the furnace like devils with black hands—and later, with flowers over them, cool and rigid in their Sunday suits, not even the rains can wash away the grit. All these beautiful gorillas going up to God with swollen muscles and lumbago and black hands . . .

One passes imperceptibly from one scene, one age, one life to another. Suddenly, walking down a street, be it real or be it a dream, one realizes for the first time that the years have flown, that all this has passed forever and will live on only in memory; and then the memory turns inward with a strange clutching brilliance and one goes over these scenes and incidents perpetually, in dream and reverie, while walking a street, while lying with a woman, while reading a book, while talking to a stranger . . . Henceforward we walk split into a myriad fragments, like an insect with a hundred feet, a centipede with soft-stirring feet that drinks in the atmosphere; we walk with sensitive filaments that drink avidly of past and future, and all things melt into music and sorrow; we walk against a united world as-

serting our dividedness. All things, as we walk, splitting with us into a myriad iridescent fragments. The great fragmentation of maturity. The great change. In youth we were whole and the terror and pain of the world penetrated us through and through . . . And then comes a time when suddenly all seems to be reversed. We live in the mind, in ideas, in fragments. We no longer drink in the wild outer music of the streets—we *remember* only. Like a monomaniac we relive the drama of our youth. Like a spider that picks up the thread over and over and spews it out according to some obsessive logarithmic pattern . . . If we are stirred by the reflection on a wet pavement it is because at the age of seven we were suddenly speared by a premonition of the life to come as we stared unthinkingly into that bright liquid mirror of the street. If the sight of a swinging door intrigues us it is the memory of a summer's evening when all the doors were swinging softly and where the light bent down to caress the shadow there were golden calves and lace and glittering parasols and through the chinks in the swinging door, like fine sand sifting through a bed of rubies, there drifted the music and the incense of gorgeous unknown bodies. Perhaps when the doors parted to give us a choking glimpse of the world, perhaps then we had the first intimation of the impact of sin, the first intimation that here over little round tables, spinning in the light, our feet idly scraping the sawdust, our hands touching the cold stem of a glass, that here over these little round tables which later we are to look at with such yearning and reverence, that here, I say, we are to feel in the years to come the first iron of love, the first stains of rust, the first black, clawing hands of the pit . . .

Extensive quotation is the only way to try to indicate the sweep and volume of Miller's prose, the powerful swell and cadence of its music. Its rough masculinity is very far removed from "toughness" in the Hemingway sense; it has a rampaging Elizabethan quality, a

rare tonic vitality which comes from the savage health of its creator. Taken in bulk, with all its prodigious tracts of roughage, its plateaux covered in uncut gems, its weird tracts of half-explored vegetation running along the snow-lines of metaphysics—one is reminded of the stutterings and stammerings of a Whitman or a Melville. Like them, Miller belongs in the direct line of American genius—a genius which is essentially formless. They are portmanteau writers, discursive, rambling and prolix: vulnerable only because they do not bother to hide the fact that they are still growing. They may be tiresome but they are never bleak; and in Miller's case at any rate almost everything he writes is rewarding, even the nonsense and the light comedy. Writers of this *genre* have a very poor literary sense. They seem to need an impresario, a resident critic to plead with them against the publication of inferior work; they need, in a sense, to be saved from their own volcanic gifts. They lack the gifts of mendacity, temperance and cunning which alone can shape a literary career. They have, however, more important things to do with their time than to spend it worrying about a "literary career." This at any rate is true of Miller, who began *Tropic of Cancer* after a long period of actual starvation in Paris, knowing perfectly well that no publisher in the world would print it . . .

The road from the Brooklyn Bridge to the Pont Neuf was a long and bitter one, packed with human experiences and a great deal of suffering. His early manhood, with its anxieties, revolts and despairs, has already been marvellously described in *Black Spring* and in *Tropic of Capricorn*. It is saturated in the sweat and violence of the open street. "There are huge blocks of my life," he writes, "which are gone forever. Huge blocks gone, scattered, wasted in talk, action, reminiscence, dream. There never was any time when

I was living *one* life, the life of a husband, a lover, a friend. Whatever I was, whatever I was engaged in, I was leading multiple lives." And this sense of multiple meaning is admirably conveyed by his writing which follows ideas and memories down long labyrinths of images, long *coulloirs*, of darkness, corridors full of shattered prisms. Miller's world is a world seen through a prism. It glitters indeed with a wild prismatic beauty. It is not a world described, contained, *edited* as the world of Proust or Joyce is: his method is the method of poetic documentary—the lens traversing the whole field from left to right, picking out dissimilar objects of scrutiny and marrying them up to the image which contains them both. Between story, poem and essay there is no dividing line. Sometimes the author uses them as separate media, sometimes he jumbles them up together. And sometimes, it must be admitted, he falls asleep in the centre of his own canvas . . . out of the sheer spirit of mischief. Miller would have made a splendid Lord of Misrule. "I can think of no lovelier day than this in the full bloom of the xxth century, with the sun rotting away and a man on a little sledge blowing the *Song of Love* through his piccolo. This day shines in my heart with such a ghastly brilliance that even if I were the saddest man in the world I should not want to leave the earth . . . Imagine having nothing on your hands but your destiny. You sit on the doorstep of your mother's womb and you kill time—or time kills you. You sit there chanting the doxology of things beyond your grasp. Outside. Forever Outside."

*Tropic of Cancer* was begun in Paris in 1931 while the author was tramping the streets all day and sleeping wherever possible during the night—sometimes in the open. It was not published until 1934. It is difficult to describe the merits of this book simply

because it is the expression of an entirely new personality in literature. While it is lacking entirely in the imposed form or proportions that one has been taught to expect in novels, the whole canvas is held together simply by the appetite and force of the personality behind the prose. This is how it begins:

I am living at the Villa Borghese. There is not a crumb of dirt anywhere, nor a chair misplaced. We are all alone here and we are dead.

Last night Boris discovered he was lousy. I had to shave his armpits and even then the itching did not stop. How can one get lousy in a beautiful place like this? But no matter. We might never have known each other so intimately, Boris and I, had it not been for the lice.

Boris has given me a summary of his views. He is a weather prophet. The weather will continue bad, he says. There will be more calamities, more death, more despair. Not the slightest indication of a change anywhere. The cancer of time is eating us away. Our heroes have killed themselves or are killing themselves. The hero, then, is not Time but Timelessness. We must get in step, a lock-step, towards the prison of death. There is no escape. The weather will not change.

It is now the fall of my second year in Paris. I was sent here for a reason I have not yet been able to fathom.

I have no money, no resources, no hopes. I am the happiest man alive. A year ago, six months ago, I thought I was an artist. I no longer think about it. *I am.* Everything that was literature has fallen from me. There are no more books to be written, thank God. This then? This is not a book. This is a libel, slander, defamation of character. This is not a book in the ordinary sense of the word . . .

Reveries, ideas, short stories, flights of images: the book contains them all. Yet its wholeness as a work of

art is quite independent of the form. The triumph is one of an individuality which, by its sheer force, has tapped the well-springs of creative prose and turned them to its own uses. The tide of lyrical emotion carries one onwards through the savagery, the obscenity, the raw humour and the marvellous descriptive poetry of the book.

Twilight hour. Indian blue, water of glass, trees glistening and liqueficient. The rails fall away into the canal at Jaurès. The long caterpillar with lacquered sides dips like a rollercoaster. It is not Paris. It is not Coney Island. It is a crepuscular mélange of all the cities of Europe and Central America. The railroad yards below me, the tracks black, webby, not ordered by engineers but cataclysmic in design like those gaunt fissures in the polar ice which the camera registers in degrees of black.

*Tropic of Cancer* might be called a description of Paris life from the viewpoint of a literary *clochard*; yet this is not all, for though Paris is reflected marvellously in these pages, the book is also a sort of swan-song for city man—a swan-song which is to end in a death-rattle! “The wallpaper with which the men of science have covered the world of reality is falling to tatters. The grand whore-house they have made of life requires no decoration; it is essential only that the drains function adequately. Beauty, that feline beauty which has us by the balls in America, is finished. To fathom the new reality it is first necessary to dismantle the drains, to lay open the gangrened ducts which compose the genito-urinary system that supplies the excreta of art . . . The age demands violence but we are getting only abortive explosions . . .”

The justification for the violence, for the obscenity, lies in the fact that such writing is fecundating; it bursts the barriers of all self-confession. Yet at every point it was healthy, vital, alive.

The publication of this book earned Miller a few admirers and the good opinion of several discerning and influential critics; it reached a second edition in its first year. After so many years of frustration, of working at jobs which he hated (the list is incredible and includes everything between a grave-digger and a concert pianist) he at last felt he had found his own voice. To be sure, it was not his first. He had begun his writing career in earnest in 1925 and had completed two long and unremarkable novels—novels which show no trace of his subsequent talents. He had also, like Whitman before him, peddled poems from door to door in the poorer quarters of New York. All this was behind him, and the publication of *Tropic of Cancer* marked a real turning point in his career.

*Black Spring* and *Tropic of Capricorn* were soon to follow, but their production was sporadically interrupted by other literary activities. An enormous volume on the world of D. H. Lawrence, which had been gathering chapters like a snowball over the previous decade, began to assume its final form. I do not know whether it was ever actually completed. Like all Miller's books it was, when I last saw it, in its thousand-page state, waiting to be pruned. *Tropic of Cancer* itself was distilled out of a colossal MS which I was lucky enough to read, and which could not have been less than fifteen hundred pages long. It seemed to me that there was enough material to make three or four *Tropic of Cancers* from it. The same sort of prolixity was evident in the books to follow. Miller's production has always been a phenomenon to his friends—not to mention the speed at which he writes. Among the other activities of this joyous period was *The Hamlet Letters*—another book which is exasperatingly good in some parts, exasperatingly bad in others; while the editing of a small

magazine in Paris kept Miller too busy for a major effort, but not busy enough to interrupt a steady flow of long critical essays, pen-portraits of intimate friends he admired, and short stories.

Public interest in his work was, and still is, sluggish, but the feeling that responsible critics in several countries admired his writing, and that at last reputable literary journals were open to him and eager to print it, acted as a tonic.

*Tropic of Capricorn* appeared in February 1939, and with its appearance Miller decided to take a holiday away from France. The curious reader will find an account of his Greek holiday in *The Colossus of Maroussi*, published in England. Early in 1940 he sailed for America where a further period of vicissitude and poverty awaited him—a period which ended some time in 1944 with his third marriage, and his establishment in a little house of his own situated in the Big Sur region of California. At the time of writing he is addressing himself to the fifth volume of his autobiography. I have already stressed his refusal to create a mould of form in which to cast his work—as Joyce did by borrowing a form from Homer, as Proust did by repetition and restatement and regrouping. Miller's work has no “characters,” there are only savage charcoal cartoons of human beings: it has no time-springing—it is written in a perpetual historic present: it has no sequence, location, process . . . Its triumphs are the triumphs of all documents of the heart, and the appeal it makes to those of us who recognize his greatness, is the appeal of what is living, flowering, and indulging a boundless appetite for life. A friendly critic writes: “Miller demands rather a special recipe. Take Rousseau. Let him be psycho-analysed by Freud. Add Sennett's *Esoteric Buddhism* to Spengler. Mix this with a prose-gift as large as

Lawrence and serve in Paris. I think him a bold mystic to mix piety and sensuality—the two hungers—so well. And to show us how to be happy men as well."

There is much that is below his highest standard, to be sure, much that is careless, ill-judged, rash, spleenetic, shapeless, over-stated . . . These defects are the peculiar defects of his particular type of genius. But they should not blind us to his positive qualities. Judged by his best work he is already among the greatest contemporary writers. The completion of his seven-volume autobiography, if it fulfils the promise of what he has already given us, will put his name amongst the three or four great figures of the age. It only remains for me to add that this is a considered opinion.

## A LETTER TO LAWRENCE DURRELL

BIG SUR  
5/14/49

*Dear Larry,*

Just reread your long critical essay for *Horizon*. Superb piece of writing. Merlin, you say somewhere. Mais, c'est vous! If anyone can seduce, drug, exalt the English, it is you. I wonder what the response will be. . . . Wondering if this copy is for me to keep or to be returned with suggestions? Holding it temporarily, till I hear from you. Meanwhile a few observations which may or may not be of interest to you.

To begin with, I feel you might have taken advantage of the occasion to belabor your compatriots for not having published the autobiographical books. Whose fault is it but theirs if they are reading only fragments of my work? Had you thought of that, cher ami? Toynbee (the nephew) in reviewing a recent work bemoans the lack of the virulent *Tropics* material, but would he lift a finger (as did the French writers en masse recently) to fight the government? More of their bloody hypocrisy, you see. Just as here in America. You almost kowtow to the bastards. I see your point—you want to win them over. O. K., but you should rub it in, too. Never miss the chance, Larry me lad.

Freud . . . You've made these statements about my absorption of him and the influence several times.

True, I've read him well, but as for "influence," I'd rather say that of Rank and Jung, if any. Bergson belongs to my "youth" (tailor shop days). How much he influenced me is imponderable. The great influences were Nietzsche, Spengler, yes, Emerson, Herbert Spencer (!), Thoreau, Whitman—and Elie Faure. You can't stress the last named enough. More and more he stands out like a giant, to me.

And about "the artist". . . . It's not that I put the sage or saint above the artist. It's rather that I want to see established the "artist of life." The Christ *resurrected* would be such, for example. Milarepa was another.

This ties up with the progression, as you put it, from Bergson-Spengler to Chinese-Hindus. I think I've passed that too now. The key-word is Reality (few have put it better than Gutkind in *The Absolute Collective*). The nearest philosophy to my heart and temperament is Zen, as you probably know. I find individuals here and there, all over the world, who belong to no cult, creed or metaphysic, who are expressing what I mean, each in his own way. As near as I can put my finger on it, it always comes back to reality here and now, nothing else, nothing before or beyond.

"Poor literary sense". . . . It seems to me you have an ambivalent attitude here. You make a good defense of my "formlessness," etc. Yes. But then you make these concessions to the dead-heads. Picasso said once, "Must one always turn out a *masterpiece*?" Where does creation lie—in the thing done or in the effect? What and how a man does, acts, thinks, talks, every day is what counts, no? If you have this criterion of "literature" you nullify the other important points you make. You are talking of something altogether "illusory." The makers of literature are not the masters of art. Great books are—literature isn't.

"No *characters*"??? Perhaps. But I think with *The*

*Rosy Crucifixion* you might speak differently. Certainly they are not characters in the novelistic sense, but they are full-drawn, ample, rounded. Some of them have already made their debut in the earlier works. I keep a list of them on my wall, so as not to forget—i.e., who they really were, their real names. Quite a collection of them now.

Lastly, you may not like R.C. at all. In some ways it is a reversion to pre-*Tropic* writing. Much more conversation, direct and indirect. Many episodes, dreams, fantasies, throwbacks of all sorts. But a steady forward progression, chronologically, because I am following my notes (written in 1927!). *Capricorn*, as you know, took about two and a half pages of these notes, only. This first volume was written in New York, in about six months—first half of 1942. Hence all the bloody revision. Though no drastic changes. But I've labored to make the expression more perfect—more effective. One day you will see the revised script. It's a beauty. Anyway, in writing Vol. 2—half done now—I began to get real joy out of the writing. Laughed and chuckled a great deal. And, there is a perceptible change from Vol. 1 to 2. Inevitable after 6 or 7 years. Good too, I feel. When I finish Vol. 3 I intend to do the little book, *Draco and the Ecliptic*, like putting a cap on a milk bottle, to seal it hermetically. Haven't the least idea what it will be like—just know it must be done—and masterfully. Then I am off into the blue. . . . Joy through work hereafter. No more compulsion. I will be emptied. Maybe I'll just whistle, like a peanut stand. But I want to try sheer nonsense. [. . .]

Hope you don't take my observations as carping criticism. I think you did a superb job of it. Too damned good for *Horizon*. Ask Connolly to lend you the issue in which Herman Hesse wrote about himself—it will please you enormously. Toot a loo!

Henry

## HENRY MILLER

*Herbert Read*

THE SIMPLEST THING to say about Henry Miller is that he can write, but the temptation is then to add, if only below one's breath, some word like "beautifully," and that at once gets away from the truth. At the beginning of his first book, *Tropic of Cancer*, Miller wrote: "A year ago, six months ago, I thought I was an artist. I no longer think about it. *I am*. Everything that was literature has fallen from me. There are no more books to be written, thank God." That was in 1934, but in whichever is his latest volume, he will list more than twenty volumes, about half of them already published, half "in preparation." But not one of them, Miller would explain, is a book in the ordinary sense of the word. His whole work is "a prolonged insult, a gob of spit in the face of Art, a kick in the pants to God, Man, Destiny, Time, Love, Beauty . . ." Miller has written consistently in that spirit, and the result, as it mounts up, is one of the most significant contributions to the literature of our time.

*Literature.* That again is the wrong word. Anaïs Nin, the subject of one of Miller's essays in *Sunday After the War* and one of the few writers who can possibly be associated with him, wrote a Preface to *Tropic of Cancer* in which she said: "The poetic is discovered by stripping away the vestiture of art; by descending to

what might be styled 'a pre-artistic level,' the durable skeleton of form which is hidden in the phenomena of disintegration reappears to be transfigured again in the ever-changing flesh of emotion. The scars are burned away—the scars left by the obstetricians of culture. Here is an artist who re-establishes the potency of illusion by gaping at the open wounds, by courting the stern, psychological reality which man seeks to avoid through recourse to the oblique symbolism of art."

There are clues in *Sunday After the War* to Miller's underlying purpose. He confesses that he has "the itch" to write, but that he already regards as a confession of failure. "The truly great writer does not want to write: he wants the world to be a place in which he can live the life of the imagination. The first quivering word he puts to paper is the word of the wounded angel: pain." And on another page he says that no man would set a word down on paper if he had the courage to live out what he believed in. But later on Miller seems to wriggle out of his nihilistic dilemma, and he does so by making a distinction between art and "an egotistical performance on the part of the intellect." What he is protesting against all through is not art, in any vital sense of the word, but culture, symbolism, clichés and conventions of every sort. He recognizes that it is only through art that one finally establishes contact with reality—"that is the great discovery." As for "establishing contact with reality," that, as Plato held long ago, and as Miller holds now, is a matter of putting ourselves in unison with the world order—

to know what is the world order in contradistinction to the wishful-thinking orders which we seek to impose on one another . . . We have first to acquire vision, then discipline and forbearance. Until we have the humility to acknowledge the existence of a vision beyond our own, until we have faith and trust in superior powers,

the blind must lead the blind . . . The great joy of the artist is to become aware of a higher order of things, to recognize by the compulsive and spontaneous manipulations of his own impulses the resemblance between human creations and what is called 'divine' creations. In works of fantasy the existence of law manifesting itself through order is even more apparent than in other works of art. Nothing is less mad, less chaotic, than a work of fantasy. Such a creation, which is nothing less than pure invention, pervades all levels, creating, like water, its own level.

Genius is the norm—that is another axiom of such a theory of art. Miller uses a word which Cézanne was fond of—*realization*. "Seeing, knowing, discovering, enjoying—these faculties or powers are pale and lifeless without realization. The artist's game is to move over into reality." It sounds so simple, but as an individual psychological process it is supremely difficult; it is also tragic, because it involves a complete break with what at any given moment is implied by one's civilization. Realization and civilization are contradictions, as a psychologist like Trigant Burrow has long maintained: as D. H. Lawrence, who was influenced by Dr. Burrow, also maintained: and as Miller, in many respects a successor to Lawrence and his fervent admirer, also maintains.

*Civilized*, we say. What a horrible word! What be-deviled idiocy skulks behind that arrogant mark! Oh, I am not thinking of this war, nor of the last one, nor of any or all the wars men waged in the name of *Civilization*. I am thinking of the periods in between, the rotten stagnant eras of peace, the lapses and relapses, the lizard-like sloth, the creepy mole-like burrowing-in, the fungus growths, the barnacles, the stink-weeds; I am thinking of the constant fanatical dervish dance that goes on in the name of all that is unreal, unholy and unattainable, thinking of the sadistic-masochist tug of

war, now one getting the upper hand, now the other. In the name of humanity when will we cry *Enough*?

Many people will sympathize with the vivid indignation of that outcry, but will not be prepared for all that might be involved in the opposite process of realization. Consider, for example, what the law would call Henry Miller's obscenity. Ignoring the underground circulation of pornography, Miller is probably, in this technical sense, the most obscene writer in the history of literature. At least, he exceeds the considerable efforts of writers like Catullus, Petronius, Boccaccio and Rabelais. But he is never obscene for obscenity's sake—there is no "effort" about his obscenity—it is all part of the process of realization, a natural consequence of his devastating honesty, and also of his vitality. The nearest parallel I can think of is the obscenity of the unexpurgated *Thousand Nights and One Night*—those tales are essentially innocent, apparently not designed to shock the unsuspecting reader. But such a comparison is false if it suggests that Miller is in any sense a manufacturer of *pastiches*. As Anaïs Nin says so well in the Preface already referred to, "it is no false primitivism which gives rise to this savage lyricism. It is not a retrogressive tendency, but a swing forward into unbeaten areas. To regard a naked book such as this with the same critical eye that is turned upon even such diverse types as Lawrence, Breton, Joyce and Céline is a mistake. Rather let us try to look at it with the eyes of a Patagonian for whom all that is sacred and taboo in our world is meaningless."

The war, which found Miller in Greece, forcibly translated him to his native States. He reacted violently, and the pages he has since written about his mother country, published under the title *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, constitute the most shatter-

ing attack ever launched against the American "way of life." *Sunday After the War*, which is a collection of extracts from various works in progress, contains fragments from this book, and others from an autobiographical narrative called *The Rosy Crucifixion*. Another narrative piece, "Reunion in Brooklyn," is also autobiographical and describes the return of the prodigal son to his poor and depressing home: it is a masterpiece of realism, as was the episode from the same background which appeared in an earlier volume, *Black Spring*, under the title "The Tailor Shop."

In 1944 Miller retired from civilization to an isolated spot on the California coast. *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* is a description of his life there, partly biographical, partly reminiscent, colloquially philosophical and essentially, as the author would be the first to admit, a potpourri. But then Miller is an inveterate hotch-potcher, and is none the worse for that. His literary ancestor is Laurence Sterne, with whom he has much in common apart from his methods of composition—his sentiment, for example, his style ("writing," said Sterne, "is but a different name for conversation") and even, as some would have it, his obscenity.

A "Note to the Reader" appears in the English edition of *Big Sur*, apologizing to author and reader alike for the fact that "certain modifications and deletions from the original book have been imposed in conformance with the law regulating book publication in Great Britain." A ridiculous law, that treats the British reader as in some sense more childish and vulnerable than his American counterpart! Having read the unexpurgated American edition before the British edition appeared, I was puzzled to know what could have brought out the blue pencil of the British printer and publisher—no doubt acting on behalf of

the tender-minded managers of circulating libraries. A casual comparison of a few pages of the two editions shows that it is for the most part a question of those familiar four-letter words with which the British workingman punctuates every sentence, and which the intelligentsia reserve for effective emphasis.

Henry Miller (again like Sterne) is not an obscene writer; he is that rare phenomenon, a completely natural writer, and he uses obscene words not deliberately like D. H. Lawrence, but as an essential part of the subject depicted. The best thing in *Big Sur* is a hundred-page portrait of a sponger called Conrad Moricand. It has the vividness of seventeenth-century Aubrey and the psychological penetration of twentieth-century Proust. To have those pungent little words replaced by a meaningless euphemism like "O. K." is to deprive the portrait of its high-lights.

The *Oranges* of Hieronymus Bosch do little more than provide Miller with a colorful title for his book. Someone gave him a copy of Wilhelm Fränger's fascinating book on Bosch, and Bosch's painting of "The Millenium" gets mixed up with the flora and fauna of the Big Sur landscape. But we quietly pass on to a picture of life on Partington Ridge—Miller's children, his neighbors (most of them voluntary exiles from civilization), the people who drop in from every quarter of the globe, the shoals of fan letters he receives, the writers he has known, the books he has read, and those he has written or proposes to write himself. It is, after all, rather like the Bosch triptych—full of naked human beings, grotesque animals, symbolic riddles and all the extremes of experience between heaven and hell. It is also consistently humorous, in spite of the apocalyptic curses on modern civilization that periodically irrupt like flames at the back of one of the panels of the Bosch triptych—in his

Californian paradise he is never for long unaware of "the unspeakable horror of this man-made universe."

But it is chiefly the prose style that one must praise. I have already called it the "natural" style—there are as many varieties of prose style as there are of poetic style. But the natural style is perhaps the rarest style, for it rides the narrow ridge between dignity and the commonplace. Ford Madox Ford used to say that W. H. Hudson wrote prose "as the grass grows," and that conveys the organic ease of the process. And it cannot be quoted in snippets: no purple patches, no perorations. Another master of a very different prose style—Miller's friend, Lawrence Durrell—has given us the best description of "its sweep and volume . . . the powerful swell and cadence of its music."

Its rough masculinity is very far removed from "toughness" in the Hemingway sense; it has a rampaging Elizabethan quality, a rare tonic vitality, which comes from the savage health of its creator. Taken in bulk, with all its prodigious tracts of roughage, its plateaux covered in uncut gems, its weird tracts of half-explored vegetation running along the snowlines of metaphysics—one is reminded of the stutterings and stammerings of a Whitman or a Melville.

Stutterings and stammerings?—that misses the casual ease of the utterance, but I admit the roughage.

What makes Miller distinctive among modern writers is his ability to combine, without confusion, the aesthetic and prophetic functions. Realization, one might imagine, is such a disinterested process that the result would be the purely objective naturalism of a *Madame Bovary*. But Flaubert's limitations have become somewhat obvious, and though his method is perfect for as far as it goes, Miller is aware that it must be carried much further, into the realm of ideas, and that the writer must not be afraid to declare his

ideals. Miller's ideals I find very acceptable—they are the ideals of what I call anarchism, and have never been expressed better than in these words which come from an essay on "Art and the Future" in *Sunday After the War*.

The cultural era is past. The new civilization, which may take centuries or a few thousand years to usher in, will not be *another* civilization—it will be the open stretch of realization which all the past civilizations have pointed to. The city, which was the birthplace of civilization, such as we know it to be, will exist no more. There will be nuclei of course, but they will be mobile and fluid. The people of the earth will no longer be shut off from one another within states but will flow freely over the surface of the earth and intermingle. There will be no fixed constellations of human aggregates. Governments will give way to management, using the word in a broad sense. The politician will become as superannuated as the dodo bird. The machine will never be dominated, as some imagine; it will be scrapped, eventually, but not before men have understood the nature of the mystery which binds them to their creation. The worship, investigation and subjugation of the machine will give way to the lure of all that is truly occult. This problem is bound up with the larger one of power—and of possession. Man will be forced to realize that power must be kept open, fluid and free. His aim will be not to possess power but to radiate it.

A power that is open, fluid and free—Miller is thinking of the relation of man to his environment, but the words describe the essential quality of his own writings.

# THE REALITY OF HENRY MILLER

*Kenneth Rexroth*

IT IS a wonderful thing that some of Henry Miller's work at last is coming out in a popular edition in the United States. Henry Miller is a really popular writer, a writer of and for real people, who, in other countries, is read, not just by highbrows, or just by the wider public which reads novels, but by common people, by the people who, in the United States, read comic books. As the Southern mountain woman said of her hero son, dead in Korea, "Mister, he was sure a great reader, always settin' in the corner with a piece of cold bread and one of them funny books." In Czech and Japanese, this is the bulk of Miller's public. In the United States he has been kept away from a popular public and his great novels have been banned; therefore only highbrows who could import them from France have read him.

I once crossed the Atlantic—eighteen days in a Compagnie Générale Transatlantique freighter—with a cabin mate, a French African Negro, who was only partially literate, but who was able to talk for hours on the comparative merits of *Black Spring* and the *Tropic of Cancer* and the *Tropic of Capricorn*. When he found out I came from California and knew Miller, he started treating me as if I were an archangel newly descended, and never tired of ques-

tions about *le Beeg Sur* and *les camarades de M'sieu Millaire*. He had a mental picture of poor Henry living on a mountain-top, surrounded by devoted handmaids and a bevy of zoot-suited existentialist jitterbugs.

This picture, I have discovered, is quite commonly believed in by people who should have better sense. Miners in the Pyrenees, camel drivers in Tlemcen, gondoliers in Venice, and certainly every *poule* in Paris, when they hear you're from California, ask, first thing, in one voice, "Do you know *M'sieu Millaire*?" This doesn't mean he isn't read by the intellectuals, the cultured people over there. He is. In fact, I should say he has become part of the standard repertory of reading matter everywhere but in England and the United States. If you have read Balzac, or Baudelaire, or Goethe, you are also expected to have read Miller. He is certainly one of the most widely read American writers, along with Upton Sinclair, Jack London, Fenimore Cooper, William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell.

This is the way it should be. Nothing was sadder than the "proletarian novelist" of a few years back, the product of a sociology course and a subscription to a butcher-paper weekly, eked out with a terrified visit to a beer parlor on the other side of the tracks and a hasty scurry past a picket line. Nobody read him but other Greenwich Village aesthetes like himself. The people Henry Miller writes about read him. They read him because he gives them something they cannot find elsewhere in print. It may not be precisely the real world, but it is nearer to it than most other writing, and it is certainly nearer than most so-called realistic writing.

Once the written word was the privilege of priests and priestly scribes. Although thousands of years have

passed, vestiges of that special privilege and caste artificiality still cling to it. It has been said that literature is a class phenomenon. Can you remember when you first started to read? Doubtless you thought that some day you would find in books the truth, the answer to the very puzzling life you were discovering around you. But you never did. If you were alert, you discovered that books were conventions, as unlike life as a game of chess. The written word is a sieve. Only so much of reality gets through as fits the size and shape of the screen, and in some ways that is never enough. This is only partly due to the necessary conventions of speech, writing, communication generally. Partly it is due to the structure of language. With us, in our Western European civilization, this takes the form of Indo-European grammar crystallized in what we call Aristotelian logic. But most of the real difficulty of communication comes from social convention, from a vast conspiracy to agree to accept the world as something it really isn't at all. Even the realistic novels of a writer like Zola are not much closer to the real thing than the documents written in Egyptian hieroglyphics. They are just a different, most complex distortion.

Literature is a social defense mechanism. Remember again when you were a child. You thought that some day you would grow up and find a world of real adults—the people who really made things run—and understood how and why things ran. People like the Martian aristocrats in science fiction. Your father and mother were pretty silly, and the other grownups were even worse—but somewhere, some day, you'd find the real grownups and possibly even be admitted to their ranks. Then, as the years went on, you learned, through more or less bitter experience, that there aren't, and never have been, any such people, any-

where. Life is just a mess, full of tall children, grown stupider, less alert and resilient, and nobody knows what makes it go—as a whole, or any part of it. *But nobody ever tells.*

Henry Miller tells. Anderson told *about* the little boy and the Emperor's new clothes. Miller is the little boy himself. He tells about the Emperor, about the pimples on his behind, and the warts on his private parts, and the dirt between his toes. Other writers in the past have done this, of course, and they are the great ones, the real classics. But they have done it within the conventions of literature. They have used the forms of the Great Lie to expose the truth. Some of this literature is comic, with a terrifying laughter—Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Jonson's *Volpone*, Machiavelli's *Mandragola*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Some of it is tragic, in the ordinary sense, like the *Iliad*, or Thucydides' history, or *Macbeth*. In the last analysis it is all tragic, even Rabelais, because life itself is tragic. With very few exceptions, however, it is all conventional. It disguises itself in the garments of harmless artistic literature. It sneaks in and betrays the complacent and deluded. A great work of art is a kind of Trojan Horse. There are those who believe that this is all there is to the art of poetry—sugar-coating the pills of prussic acid with which the poet doses the Enemy.

It is hard to tell sometimes when Miller is being ironic and when he is being naïve. He is the master of a deadpan style, just as he has a public personality that alternates between quiet gentleness—"like a dentist," he describes it—and a sort of deadpan buffoonery. This has led some critics to consider him a naïve writer, a "modern primitive," like the painter Rousseau. In a sense this is true.

Miller is a very unliterary writer. He writes as if he

had just invented the alphabet. When he writes about a book, he writes as if he were the first and only man who ever read it—and, furthermore, as if it weren't a book but a piece of the living meat whacked off Balzac or Rimbaud or whoever. Rousseau was one of the finest painters of modern times. But he was absolutely impervious to the ordinary devices of his craft. This was not because he was not exposed to other artists. He spent hours every week in the Louvre, and he was, from the 1880s to the eve of the First World War, the intimate of all the best painters and writers, the leading intellectuals of Paris. It didn't make any difference. He just went his way, being Henry Rousseau, a very great artist. But when he talked or wrote, he spouted terrible nonsense. He wasn't just a crank, but quite off his rocker in an amiable sort of way. This is not true of Miller.

In some mysterious way, Miller has preserved an innocence of the practice of Literature-with-a-capital-L which is almost unique in history. Likewise he has preserved an innocence of heart. But he is not unsophisticated. In the first place, he writes a muscular, active prose in which something is always going on and which is always under control. True, he often rambles and gets windy, but only because he likes to ramble and hear his head roar. When he wants to tell you something straight from the shoulder, he makes you reel.

Now the writer most like Miller in some ways, the eighteenth-century naïf, Restif de la Bretonne, is certainly direct from the innocent heart, but he can be as tedious as a year's mail of a Lonely Hearts Club, with the terrible verisimilitude of a "Mature woman, broadminded, likes books and music" writing to "Bachelor, fifty-two, steady job, interested in finer things." And, in addition, Restif is full of arrant non-

sense, every variety of crackpot notion. If you want the common man of the eighteenth century, with his heart laid bare, you will find him in Restif. But you will also find thousands of pages of sheer boredom, and hundreds of pages of quite loony and obviously invented pornography. Miller too is likely at times to go off the deep end about the lost continent of Mu or astrology or the "occult," but it is for a different reason. If the whole shebang is a lie anyway, certainly the amusing lies, the lies of the charlatans who have never been able to get the guillotine in their hands, are better than the official lie, the deadly one. Since Hiroshima, this attitude needs little apology. Some of our best people prefer alchemy to physics today.

There aren't many people like Miller in all literature. The only ones I can think of are Petronius, Casanova, and Restif. They all tried to be absolutely honest. Their books give an overwhelming feeling of being true, the real thing, completely uncooked. They are all intensely masculine writers. They are all great comic writers. They all convey, in every case very powerfully, a constant sense of the utter tragedy of life. I can think of no more chilling, scalp-raising passages in literature than the tolling of the bell from the very beginning of Casanova's *Memoirs*: the comments and asides of the aged man writing of his splendid youth, an old, sick friendless pauper in a drafty castle in the backwoods of Bohemia. And last, and most important, they were all what the English call "spivs." Courtier of Nero or Parisian typesetter, they were absolutely uninvolved; they just didn't give a damn whether school kept or not.

The French like to compare Miller with Sade. But nowadays they like to compare everybody with Sade. It is the currently fashionable form of Babbitt-baiting over there. The comparison is frivolous. Sade is

unbelievably tedious: Diderot stood on his head, a bigot without power, an unemployed Robespierre. In the eighteenth century the French writers most like Miller are the "primitive" Restif, and Mirabeau when, in some of his personal writings, he really works up a lather.

Miller has often been compared with Céline, but I don't think the comparison is apposite. Céline is a man with a thesis; furthermore, he is a littérateur. In *Journey to the End of the Night*, he set out to write the epic of a Robinson Crusoe of the modern soul, the utterly alienated man. He did it, very successfully. Céline and his friends stumble through the fog, over the muddy ruts with the body of Robinson, in a denouement as monumental as the *Nibelungenlied*. But it is all a work of art. I have been in the neighborhoods Céline describes. They simply aren't that awful. I am sure, on internal evidence of the story itself, that his family wasn't that bad. And, like Malraux and some others, he is obsessed with certain marginal sexual activities which he drags in all the time, willy-nilly.

Céline makes a sociological judgment on Robinson. Miller is Robinson, and, on the whole, he finds it a bearable role, even enjoyable in its way. The modern French writers who most resemble Miller are Carco, without the formulas, Mac Orlan, if he weren't so slick, Artaud, if he weren't crazy, and Blaise Cendrars. Cendrars is a good European and Miller is only an amateur European, but Europe has been going on so long that the insights of the amateur are often much more enlightening.

Henry Miller is often spoken of as a religious writer. To some this just seems silly, because Miller is not especially profound. People expect religion to come to them vested in miracle, mystery, and authority, as

Dostoevski said. The founders of the major religions are pretty well hidden from us by the accumulation of centuries of interpretation, the dirt of history—the lie you prefer to believe. Perhaps originally they weren't so mysterious and miraculous and authoritarian. Mohammed lived in the light of history. We can form a pretty close idea of what he was like, and he wasn't very prepossessing in some ways. He was just naïvely direct. With the simple-mindedness of a camel driver he cut through the welter of metaphysics and mystification in the Near East of his time. Blake dressed his message up in sonorous and mysterious language; but the message itself is simple enough. D. H. Lawrence likewise. You could write it all on a postage stamp: "Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin. Your official reality is a lie. We must love one another or die." I suppose any writer who transcends conventional literature is religious insofar as he does transcend it. That is why you can never actually base an educational system on the "Hundred Best Books." A hundred of the truest insights into life as it is would destroy any educational system and its society along with it.

Certainly Miller is almost completely untouched by what is called religion in England and America and northern Europe. He is completely pagan. This is why his book on Greece, *The Colossus of Maroussi*, is a book of self-discovery as well as a very true interpretation of Greece. It is thoroughly classic. Although he never mentions Homer and dismisses the Parthenon, he did discover the life of Greece: the common, real life of peasants and fishermen, going on, just as it has gone on ever since the Doric invasions. A world of uncompromised people, of people if not like Miller himself, at least like the man he knew he wanted to be.

His absolute freedom from the Christian or Jewish anguish of conscience, the sense of guilt, implication,

and compromise, makes Miller humane, maybe even humanistic, but it effectively keeps him from being humanitarian. He might cry over a pet dog who had been run over, or even punch the guilty driver in the nose. He might have assassinated Hitler if he had had the chance. He would never join the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals or the Friends' Service Committee. He is not involved in the guilt, and so in no way is he involved in the penance. This comes out in everything he writes, and it offends lots of people. Others may go to bullfights and write novels preaching the brotherhood of man. Miller just doesn't go to the bullfight in the first place. So, although he often raves, he never preaches. People have been taught to expect preaching, practically unadulterated, in even the slick fiction of the women's magazines, and they are offended now if they don't find it.

Fifty percent of the people in this country don't vote. They simply don't want to be implicated in organized society. With, in most cases, a kind of animal instinct, they know that they cannot really do anything about it, that the participation offered them is a hoax. And even if it weren't, they know that if they don't participate, they aren't implicated, at least not voluntarily. It is for these people, the submerged fifty per cent, that Miller speaks. As the newspapers never tire of pointing out, this is a very American attitude. Miller says, "I am a patriot—of the Fourteenth Ward of Brooklyn, where I was raised." For him life has never lost that simplicity and immediacy. Politics is the deal in the saloon back room. Law is the cop on the beat, shaking down whores and helping himself to apples. Religion is Father Maguire and Rabbi Goldstein, and their actual congregations. Civilization is the Telegraph Company in *Tropic of Capricorn*. All

this is a quite different story to the art critics and the literary critics and those strange people the newspapers call "pundits" and "solons."

I am sure the editors of our butcher-paper liberal magazines have never sat in the back room of a sawdust saloon and listened to the politicians divide up the take from the brothels that line the boundary streets of their wards. If they did, they would be outraged and want to bring pressure to bear in the State Capitol. With Miller, that is just the way things are, and what of it?

So there isn't any social message in Miller, except an absolute one. When you get through reading the realistic novels of James Farrell or Nelson Algren, you have a nasty suspicion that the message of the author is: "More playgrounds and properly guided social activities will reduce crime and vice." There is nothing especially frightful about Miller's Brooklyn; like Farrell's South Side, it is just life in the lower middle class and upper working class section of a big American city. It certainly isn't what queasy reviewers call it, "the slums." It's just the life the reviewers themselves led before they became reviewers. What outrages them is that Miller accepts it, just as do the people who still live there. Accepting it, how he can write about it! He can bring back the whole pre-World War I America—the bunny hug, tunes from *The Pink Lady*, Battling Nelson, Dempsey the Nonpareil, Pop Anson and Pearl White, a little boy rushing the growler with a bucket of suds and a sack of six-inch pretzels in the smoky twilight of a Brooklyn Sunday evening.

I think that is what Miller found in Paris. Not the city of Art, Letters, and Fashion—but prewar Brooklyn. It is certainly what I like best about Paris, and it is what I get out of Miller's writing about Paris. He is

best about Paris where it is still most like 1910 Brooklyn. He doesn't write about the Latin Quarter, but about the dim-lit streets and dusty little squares which lie between the Latin Quarter and the Jardin des Plantes, where men sit drinking beer in their shirt sleeves in front of dirty little bars in another smoky Sunday twilight. He is better about the jumble of streets between Montrouge and Montparnasse with its polyglot and polychrome population of the very poor, than he is about Montparnasse itself and its artists' life. He practically ignores Montmartre; apparently he concludes that only suckers go there. But he writes very convincingly about that most Brooklyn-like of all the quarters of Paris, the district near the Military Academy on the Place du Champs de Mars, now filling up with Algerians and Negroes, where the subway becomes an elevated, tall tenements mingle with small bankrupt factories and people sit on the doorsteps fanning themselves in the Brooklyn-like summer heat, and sleep and couple on the summer roofs.

So his intellectuals in Paris are assimilated to Brooklyn. They may talk about Nietzsche and Dostoevski, but they talk like hall-room boys, rooming together, working at odd jobs, picking up girls in dance halls and parks. "Batching" is the word. Over the most impassioned arguments and the bawdiest conversations lingers an odor of unwashed socks. The light is the light of Welsbach mantles on detachable cuffs and unmade beds. Of course that is the way they really talked, still do for that matter.

There is a rank, old-fashioned masculinity about this world which shocks the tender-minded and self-deluded. It is far removed from the Momism of the contemporary young American male. This is why Miller is accused of writing about all women as

though they were whores, never treating them as "real persons," as equals. This is why he is said to lack any sense of familial love. On the whole, I think this is true. Most of the sexual encounters in the *Tropics* and *The Rosy Crucifixion* are comic accidents, as impersonal as a pratfall. The woman never emerges at all. He characteristically writes of his wives as bad boys talk of their schoolteachers. When he takes his sexual relations seriously, the woman disappears in a sort of marshy cyclone. She becomes an erotic giantess, a perambulating orgy. Although Miller writes a lot about his kinship with D. H. Lawrence, he has very little of Lawrence's abiding sense of the erotic couple, of man and woman as the two equal parts of a polarity which takes up all of life. This again is Brooklyn, pre-suffragette Brooklyn. And I must admit that it is true, at least for almost everybody. A real wedding of equals, a truly sacramental marriage in which every bit of both personalities, and all the world with them, is transmuted and glorified, may exist; in fact, some people may have a sort of talent for it; but it certainly isn't very common. And the Great Lie, the social hoax in which we live, has taken the vision of this transcendent state and turned it into its cheapest hoax and its most powerful lie. I don't see why Miller should be blamed if he has never found it. Hardly anybody ever does, and those who do usually lose it in some sordid fashion. This, of course, is the point, the message, if you want a message, of all his encounters in parks and telephone booths and brothels. Better this than the lie. Better the flesh than the World and the Devil. And this is why these passages are not pornographic, but comic like *King Lear* and tragic like *Don Quixote*.

At least once, Miller makes up for this lack. The tale of the *Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company* in *Tropic*

*of Capricorn* is a perfect portrait of our insane and evil society. It says the same thing others have said, writing on primitive accumulation or on the condition of the working class, and it says it far more convincingly. This is human self-alienation at its uttermost, and not just theoretically, or even realistically. It is an orgy of human self-alienation, a cesspool of it, and Miller rubs your nose in it. Unless you are a prig and a rascal, when you get through, you know, once and for all, what is the matter. And through it all, like Beatrice, if Beatrice had guided Dante through the Inferno, moves the figure of Valeska, who had Negro blood and who kills herself at the end—one of the most real women in fiction, if you want to call it fiction.

Once Miller used to have pinned on his bedroom door a scrap of paper. Written on it was “S-agapo”—the Greek for “I love you.” In *The Alcoholic Veteran* he says, “The human heart cannot be broken.”

## THE REBEL-BUFFOON: HENRY MILLER'S LEGACY

*Kingsley Widmer*

ON THE FIRST PAGE of Miller's first book, *Tropic of Cancer*, he announces that he is about to give a "kick in the pants to God, Man, Destiny, Time, Love, Beauty." And so, with a frequently vivacious mixture of topsy-turvy poetry and street-corner invective, he does. For his peculiar talent does not so much explore or transform reality as make the defiant rhetorical gestures of a comic refugee from Brooklyn pathos. Thus Miller rebels against his past, his self, the America of his frustrations, and the hypocritical heroic idealism of Western civilization. In so doing, he dresses himself in a series of mock-identities: all-American boy and underground litterateur, confessional *enfant terrible* and literary saint, innocent abroad and American Columbus in chains, homegrown dadaist and megalopolitan Thoreau, Sunday painter and Saturday night philosopher. In short, Miller plays, and is, the artist-clown.

When Miller's pyrotechnical rhetoric and bumptious clowning come together he produces, I believe, his best work, and furthers a tradition of wildly poetic American humor with its free-swinging iconoclasm, vividly obscene fantasias, loud burlesque pathos, and grotesquely wayward wisdom. Everyone remembers and borrows some of his most effective rhetorical

flourishes, such as his titles. "The Air-Conditioned Nightmare" has become a standard epithet; "A Coney Island of the Mind" catches our amorphousness, as Lawrence Ferlinghetti indicated in taking it for the title of his volume of comic-pastiche verses. Many other Miller titles aptly freeze an attitude in a phrase: the mocking description of the God of America ("The Most Lovely Inanimate Object in Existence"), the tongue-in-cheek self-descriptions ("Megalopolitan Maniac" and "The Soul of Anaesthesia"), and sardonic oxymorons like "Creative Death" (positive nihilism), *Black Spring* (the season of ecstatic despair), and "The Land of F—."

Such gestures dominate Miller's writings. He is right when he insists that plot, character, logical sequence, and other usual forms of prose order do not fit most of his work. Miller's verbal fireworks and buffoonish revelations aim at something other than dramatic art and subtle perception. For example, the famous section of *Tropic of Capricorn* about Miller's revolt against the frenzied labors in the telegraph office is awkwardly fragmented narrative. Miller is less concerned with what happened than with how he felt about it. The characters are drastically incomplete, caught only in their pathetic and violent grotesqueries. The violence and fragmentation have misled some readers into believing that the author's experiences were unique; actually, they were not unusual, at least to those who have held a variety of marginal jobs in America. What is unusual may be found in Miller's rhetorical rage in which he telegraphs to the reader heightened metaphors of wars, hospitals, sewers, and other images of disgust and despair for our accepting madness. He also burlesques the opposing rhetoric of Horatio Alger success and American public ideals, and perhaps most fully in presenting himself as

a confusedly frenzied and euphoric, compassionate and opportunistic, immoral clown. In some of his eloquent flourishes—"The Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company of North America"—he achieves provocative comedy. The outrageous role and the magical naming provide the center of Miller's attitude as well as art. Behind the fanciful and humorous hurling of words resides desperation about a world in which things and actions and principles threaten to be meaningless. Miller jokes in mortal earnestness when he writes in *Cancer*: "We're all dead, or dying, or about to die. We need good titles."

The twentieth-century art of defying despair takes two comic directions. One includes grimacing silence, as in the increasingly speechless mimicry of Beckett and Ionesco and other dramatists of the absurd, in the prose of pure things and actions in the antirhetorical novel, and in the aesthetic of ellipsis in ironic and Zen-like modes of poetry. The other direction is into total rhetoric, as in the late Joyce and other self-propelling verbal machines, in psychoanalytic complete verbalization of recall, and in surrealism's absolute release of language and imagery from convention and logic. Miller derives from the rhetorical school, though with characteristic American geniality his style is less monumental and more humorous. His most ornate verbal comedy—the sections of semi-free association at the end of the *Hindu*, *Dijon*, and second *Fillmore* episodes in *Tropic of Cancer*; about Broadway, ovaries and pudendums, and his "black" passion in *Tropic of Capricorn*; the "barbaric passacaglia" and other jazz "cadenzas" in *Colossus of Maroussi*; the burlesque lists of American names, places, and things in *Nexus* and *Plexus*—become Whitmanesque catalogues and barbaric yawps with the odd twists of surrealism's "*humour noir*." Most of

these passages start from despair, disgust, anxiety, or alienation which the narrator, by crazy rhetorical piling, makes into comic structures. Miller cackles at catastrophes. For this burlesque *shaman*, comic incantation creates ecstatic identity opposed to the world's falsity and destructiveness.

Miller, as several of his most astute critics have noted, displays a horror of ordinary life. Depressed by the meanness of usual domesticity, the drudgery of common jobs, the flatness and hypocrisy of everyday conventions and feelings, he flees desperately into the role of artist. And in his art, he flees the ordinary by a comic flow of heightened language. Note Miller's recurrent strategy in the *Tropics* and the *Rosy Crucifixion* volumes when caught in menial and miserable daily circumstances. The language takes on satiric flourishes, then burlesque enlargement, usually ending in a jesting prose frenzy. In the episode in *Cancer* about the Ghandi disciple in Paris, Miller satirizes pseudo saintliness, then turns that Hindu bumpkin's impropriety with a *bidet* into a wild fantasia. With an iconoclastic inversion of sacred rhetoric, Miller presents an excremental vision in which the whole divine miracle turns out to be two lumps of dung on a silver platter. Then moral exaltation becomes the laugh of the "hyena." Through incongruous verbal elaboration the muckiness of life turns into comic nihilism. The same process develops around his miserable job at the Dijon school where the somewhat Dickensian narrative fragments into fine mocking epigrams on teachers, education, and culture, and then snowballs into a rhetorical fantasia about the place as a constipated penitentiary over-flowing with frozen excrement. Thus Miller achieves violent laughter in a mean and meaningless cosmos.

Another way of comically transforming the ordi-

nary may be found in the rhetoric of fragmentation which Miller appropriately labels his "schizophrenia." While the extended pieces of this surreal prose-poetry seem clogged and mannered accumulations—"Scenario," "Jabberwhorl Cronstadt," "Into the Night Life," "With Edgar Varese in the Gobi Desert" provide examples—its brief use for comic incongruity can be effective. (The style has also been adopted by Ginsberg, Corso, and other "Beat" poets.) Miller partly explains his impetus to the disjunctive style in *Tropic of Capricorn* after he is asked about ovaries during a trolley ride: "from the idea of diseased ovaries there germinated in a lightning flash [in my mind] a sort of tropical growth made up of the most heterogeneous sorts of odds and ends." He goes on to confess that this happens because "I had never done what I wanted and out of not doing what I wanted there grew up inside me this creation which was nothing but an obsessional plant . . . which was appropriating everything." Hence the sub-title of *Capricorn*, "On the Ovarian Trolley," which carries the reader not into reality but into a gigantic womb of compensatory rhetoric. Miller also plays upon what he shrewdly calls his "cannibal" sensibility—an elaboration of the fragmented image in a voracious hunger for discrete sensations. For example, a woman's "rosebush" in *Cancer* becomes completely autonomous from the human being in a "perverse love of the thing-in-itself" (perhaps in parody of "Immanuel Pussyfoot Kant" and his *ding-an-sich*). Through Miller's world, as in surrealist painting, flow "alienated extraneous objects." He applies the same logic of grotesque alienation to himself, as in *Sexus* when he suggests that an active part of his anatomy is "like a cheap gadget from the five and ten cent store, like a bright colored piece of fishing tackle minus the bait. . . ." This schizoid fracturing

and the wild piling of incongruous associations applies to Miller's moral feelings and sentiments as well as to sexual organs and actions. With a kind of comic horror, Miller exaggerates rather than disguises his peculiarities—the basic principle of buffoonery.

Such grotesqueness is comic partly because of pure verbal and imagistic playfulness, but also because comedy has always asserted the physical—especially the sexual and excremental—as the fundamental incongruities of the human. Miller, rooted in traditional American male hyperbole about the "obscene" facts, presents extreme sexual alienation. Through the heightening of his fragmented images and obsessional rhetoric, the self-alienation of our age becomes for Miller both the meaning and the delight of existence. With all principles and ideologies of "reality" gone uncertain at the end of post-Kantian thought, Miller rhetorically glories in the fragmentation and makes a surreal womb of words his cosmos. Thus his clowning rhetoric in his early work, amidst human sordidness in a doomed world, provides comic acceptance of a fractured self and laughing affirmation of the surrounding unreality.

Rational and moral comedy, the historians tell us, used society and its commonsense as a norm to make the comic standard a golden mean. Irrational and amoral comedy, as in Miller's frenzied and bemused alienation, uses the sense of loss of authenticity and community as its alienated norm, and so instead of a golden mean we get a black extreme of humor. For much of twentieth-century experience Miller may well belong to the more relevant comic mode. Critics have rightly noted, for example, that a brilliant contemporary novel, J. P. Donleavy's *The Ginger Man*, has the wild nihilistic humor of the Henry Miller tradition. *The Ginger Man*, with its innocently cyni-

cal American abroad and its harsh bawdy and ecstatic rebelliousness, may have a direct source in *Tropic of Cancer*. More generally, Miller may have provided a direction of rebel-buffoonery for such poetic-fantastic comedies of alienation as Algren's *A Walk on the Wild Side*, Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*, and, most certainly, the current work of Norman Mailer. Those who cannot recognize this comic heritage are probably living in the golden past rather than the perplexed dark absurdity of the present.

Miller, in his best works, does something more than play verbal arpeggios on the themes of alienated humor: he creates significant grotesque types. His comic dead-pan reporting often aptly documents the pathetic buffoonery of traditional American maledom. Sometimes the figure is called Henry Miller. Or he uses as *persona* a garrulous, lamenting, sentimental-cynical small-time Faustian American abroad (Van Norden) or a bulling, griping, mawkish-tough Brooklyn boy at home (MacGregor). The pyrrhic gestures of "Miller" and his "friends" iconoclastically and sentimentally talking big and acting small is the other side of the American mythic pattern of silent heroes who do monstrously large things. Just as classical lines of comic and tragic heroes in drama have fused into the dominant modern anti-hero, so Miller fuses humor and bathos, compassion and cynicism, to set forth desperate buffoons.

One such is the pimp-and-poet narrator of Miller's early portrait, "Mademoiselle Claude," who treats a prostitute with equally outrageous sentimentality and opportunism. He not only propounds dreams of romantic bliss around her but exalts his feelings into the "mystic," yet exploits, cheats, and finally gives a venereal infection to the poor genteel street whore.

Another such figure is the anxious tourist of "via Dieppe-Newhaven" who plays the fool to customs officials, alternately swaggering and cringing, then grandiloquently philosophizes about the "sense of voyage" of a ferry trip. A similar figure narrates "The Alcoholic Veteran with the Washboard Cranium." With gross rationalizations about his having shown too much sympathy twenty years earlier, he dismisses and disparages his double, an imaginative moocher, then lectures on how to make "people more kindly and tolerant." The sentimentalist is revealed, with superb candor, as peculiarly loveless. Just so, most of Miller's narrators rage on until they stand revealed as buffoons, asserting their mocking wisdom by burlesquing all heroic qualities.

Perhaps Miller's best grotesque is "Max." The author's attitude towards this Polish-American Jew, an aging pants presser stranded in Paris without job, money, friends, or hope, shows his usual ambivalence about suffering in the drastic alternations between contempt and compassion. He mocks the lumbering and lamenting Jew, yet his awareness of the buffoonish sufferer enlarges until he sees him as the quintessence of misery—"suffering itself." Like the cripple in Nathanael West's surreal-bitter-comedy, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Max comes to represent all the anonymous victims of defeat and despair. Here Miller wisely employs his surreal imagery to enrich, rather than take over, his subject, as when he catches Max's misery wearing its truth like a distorted mask—"the look of absolute disgust which hung about his face like a rotten halo." Miller also draws upon the sardonic-pathetic doubleness of Yiddish humor: poor Max has been given a suit that looks too prosperous for a beggar, and he groans, "If only I shouldn't look so well." Miller also amusingly capitalizes on his own egotism,

consciously exploiting Max's misery for literary material, for an audience for his own buffoonish role as suffering artist, and for an aid in defining himself. Why was the down-and-outer of *Tropic of Cancer* never as desperately miserable as this Jew? Miller suggests that it must be his American-born "innocence." That means, I take it, that the egotistical energy and optimistic faith of this representative American inherently turns suffering into comedy.

Miller's strange mixture of farce and compassion breaks through his usual self-interest to focus on Max's deepest misery and absurdity. Genial American charity—a meal, a bath, a suit that was too small for Miller, an autographed copy of *Tropic of Cancer*—doesn't resolve Max's problems for he then opens to view the fullest misery of the anxious outcast in an impersonal world. Obsessed with fears of lonely madness and death, Max writes a ridiculously semi-literate letter to Miller, begging for help which can never come. The hopeless case, the archetypal clowning and lugubrious Jew, provides an unanswerable image of suffering human absurdity, without end or solace or dignity. The implicit moral of the tale seems to be that, beyond charity, one must responsively accept the human condition for what it grotesquely is.

Most of the time, however, Miller attempts to turn every crucifixion "rosy." Thus the title *The Rosy Crucifixion* for his interminable anthology of "biographical romances" and burlesque fantasias in which he seeks to find himself by turning uncertain sufferings into comic identity. In his serio-comic version of the Sherwood Anderson flight into a larger world—Miller's longing to transcend his Brooklyn ethos and self by playing the Good European, the Artist, and the Prophet—he searches for roles which would separate him from a grimly bland America, provide an imagi-

native communal heritage, and create a richer, freer, responsive self. The American ghetto Jew, alien yet with a community, bottom dog yet intellectual rhetorician, suffering yet humorous, provides a major antitype. In *Sexus* Miller puts in the mouth of one of his oldest friends a self-definition: "You're no *goy*. You're a black Jew." Miller claims to pass for a Jew, and feel at home only with Jews. He even makes his Dark Lady of traditional American romantic witchery and sensualism (Mona/Mara) Jewish in *Plexus*, and says that he loves her because she is Jewish. In *Nexus* he gives one of his last remaining American friends, a Jew, the power of dubbing him: "Miller . . . you're what I'd call a good Jew."

Miller thus inverts his anti-Semitic heritage and his ambitions for a new identity into that of the bitter-sweet clown and comic-tragic scapegoat of Western culture. His apocalyptic apostrophe to the New York ghetto in *Sexus*, his grotesquely loving portraits of Crazy Sheldon, Dr. Kronski, Eisenstein, and other Jews all through the biographical romances, and his ruminations elsewhere on Jewish literature, carry out the role. Probably the best of the Jewish caricatures, after "Max," is that of the rabbinical clown Elfenbein in *Nexus*. This joking, raging monologuist, an old Yiddish actor, is the prophet-jester who longs to dance at the funeral of the dead-alive *goyim*—as does Henry Miller. Elfenbein summarizes part of Miller's comic theology, a sort of neo-Sabbatian heresy: "Drown yourself in the pleasures of the flesh, but hang on [to the vision of God] by a hair." The Jew as sensual prophet, warm-hearted pariah, and wise-fool in an alien world, provides Miller with an honorific buffoon role. Ambiguous Jewishness, of course, has now become one of the richest and most pervasive sources of intellectual urban humor in contemporary

American fiction. Ever so Gentile Henry Miller gesturing as an imaginary Jew is simultaneously rebel and buffoon.

The grotesque delight in grotesques applies to much of Miller's writing. It appears in his burlesque sketches of America, of which by far the best are "Soirée in Hollywood," "Astrological Fricassee," and "The Staff of Life." These comic set-pieces also show some other characteristics of Miller's buffoonery. In "Soirée" he uses a speeded-up violence indebted to slapstick and a dead-pan patter of non-sequiturs out of vaudeville to mock Hollywood as the corny penultimate of an unreal society. In much of Miller's American writing his style suffers from righteous bombast, perhaps reflecting the traumatic rage of his personal disillusionment with the American Dream, but on the mad periphery such as Hollywood he can visualize his material with wry detachment. "Astrological Fricassee" goes further in its artful caricaturization of the nether world of a party of "psychopomps," fusing surreal techniques with genial American farce. An ostentatious American lady is described as "the twin sister of Carrie Nation done by Grant Wood in a moment of Satanic illumination," with her heart "ticking away like a rusty Ingersoll" and blood "running through her veins like mucilage soaking through blotting paper"; an arch-British Lady, with three cherries on her hat and deflated leathery breasts, bows like a "broken hinge" and stands like a "tipsy Gainsborough to which Marc Chagall had put the finishing touches." Thus Miller adapts visual burlesque (and surrealist painting) to comic rhetoric. He also bombardes the huckstering frauds of over-blown American pretensions with jabberwocky, parodied name-dropping, erudite nonsense, and other verbal deflations. The wild word is all.

The burlesque essay "The Staff of Life" broadly satirizes American bad taste in marriage as well as in bread, inadequate spice in conversation as well as in salad, sugary sensuality in sex as well as in beverages, and flatness in life-style as well as in cheese. The comic mechanisms include mock-logical sequences (beginning with bread and ending with the "decay and dissolution of our once glorious Republic"), comic displacement (pity for the birds rather than the people, "moultling in season and out," bleating and wheezing instead of singing, because of a diet of American crusts), and parody multiplication (a recipe which includes ketchup and kerosene, anchovies and urine, to improve "the staff of our unsavoury and monotonous life"). With the addition of twisted colloquialisms, bravura catalogues, flowing invective, and laconic "straight" asides, Miller has most of the grimacing repertoire of the "stand-up" comedian's monologue. Within the hyper-logic of burlesque, Miller's gross rebellion against American grossness becomes art. In comic inflation he can properly ignore the multiple shadings and nuances of awareness which his naïveté, egotism, and alienation deny him and which drastically weaken his efforts at more literal or serious writing.

"What do I find wrong with America? Everything." Only from the extreme stance of the saint or the fool can the total rejection of a given order of society be meaningful. The rebellious wisdom of the fool is in the detached simplicity with which he can annihilate all complex reality. Unfortunately, Miller frequently does not recognize his essentially comic perspective and limitations. But when he does, he hilariously follows out the logic of the American (though not the mixed American realities) who hates human communion even more than Communism, suspects rich re-

sponsiveness even more than regal simplicity, and, in creating the world center of conspicuous garbage and hygienic nihilism, makes us super-aesthetes who let our machines and organizations live for us.

Miller often relates his gestures of buffoonery to dadaism and surrealism—no doubt they did provide liberating elements for natural American hyperbole and fragmentation—and rather questionably links himself with Petronius and Rabelais. But some more native roots nourished his vulgate zest and wise-fool iconoclasm. Much can be found in Miller's beloved burlesque theaters and vaudeville, in the great American silent film comedians, in traditional American male obscenity, noisy exaggeration, and deflating jokes, and similar urban folk styles. Part of this richly mimetic and mocking heritage goes back through several thousand years of the popular arts of fools, jesters, clowns, and buffoons. It may well be that Miller's revolt was less a negation of Puritanism, Philistinism and Americanism than of the restrained style, genteel sensibility, and emasculated humor of reigning Anglo-Saxon literary culture. The rough comic heritage which Miller helped rediscover for literature, along with an increasing number of recent continental dramatists and American novelists, provides a more relevant laughing defiance at a dubious world.

However, Miller, often a self-aggrandizing fundamentalist of the imagination, does not just make comedy out of rebellious buffoonery but himself. When most serious, after having bootstrapped a "Brooklyn non-entity" into a capital-A artist (he is often less concerned with writing than playing the role of writer), he is very funny indeed. Announcing that he is the only man in America who truly understood Dostoevsky, or identifying a timorous and garrulous middle-aged comedian, Henry Miller, with the violent adoles-

cent rebel and poet-adventurer, Arthur Rimbaud (and insisting that his sufferings "far outweighed" Rimbaud's) is unadmitted literary buffoonery. Much of the later Miller, as in his unacknowledged parody of pedantry in *The Books in My Life*, or his imitation of advertising blurbs when writing of his artist-friends in *Remember to Remember*, or his weird miscasting of an obtuse clown as passionately suffering lover in the *Rosy Crucifixion*, is merely foolish. His pronouncements from Big Sur on the state of the American soul and arts usually turn out to be "inspirational chats," as a devotee once admitted, "for semi-literate bohemians and rebels with 'C+' minds." His burbling occultism (curious bits of Swedenborgianism, Jewish mysticism, Zen Buddhism, and faith healers that run the gamut from psychoanalysts to Christian Scientists and Cabeza de Vaca to Rider Haggard) is mostly quaint. This *blagueur* man of letters literally publishes thousands of pages of letters to and from that "genius" to be known to history as "Miguel Feodor François Wolfgang Valentine Miller," alias God. Miller often gives in to the typical American vice of aggressive positive thinking in his ruminations about art, the good life, the unitive vision, and rhetorically correct conduct ("There is only one word to remember, as you pass in and out of life, and that word, as every great soul has said, is LOVE.").

This is far from where Miller started, as it were, with an apocalyptic "kick in the pants" at the dubious and dying heroic verities. To fill the void left by the collapsed ideal terms, Miller turned out a vast and miscellaneous stream of egotistical verbiage. There was also a smaller stream of fine comic rhetoric—surreal, obscene, whimsical, iconoclastic, learned, colloquial, desperate, poetic—which, in its striking mixture of high and low elements, became a significant part of

the major poetic-naturalistic American prose style and sensibility. Equally important, Miller's sketches displayed the loss of all authentic heroism; he and his fractured figures, quite without any tragic or moral consciousness, are grotesques. That is their virtue. They represent genuine awareness in a world in which individuality is increasingly *en marge* and rebellion against amorphous doom increasingly foolish. But they rebel anyway—"the rebel . . . is closer to God than the saint"—by refusing both heroic poses and victimization. Fools, they make the most of it, and profoundly testify to ordinary humanity in a comically sad world. In "Reunion in Brooklyn" Miller devastatingly presented the ordinary American family, ethos, and self which he transcends solely by his eloquent and grandiloquent gestures. That rhetoric becomes his identity. As humorous catharsis, it achieves art, and the rebel-buffoon a kind of heroism. His best defiance is his own absurdity, and his eye for it in others, as he reveals himself through his torn rhetoric. Miller's comedy, his most realized art, is ragged but responsively open. It provides a legacy of motley for other rebel-buffoons, and for more sardonic comedians, who insist on fully human feelings.

## 1961 and After

### TROPIC OF CANCER IN AMERICA

THE CULTURAL LAG is usually reckoned to be thirty years. It was only in 1961, thirty years after it was written and twenty-seven after its first publication in Paris, that *Tropic of Cancer* was openly published in the United States. The reaction was emphatic, for and against. Book reviewers were inclined to be sympathetic, partly because of the censorship issue involved. The book soon became a best seller and a book club selection, selling something like 1,500,000 copies, most of them paperback, during its first year.

At first Grove Press, which had published *Lady Chatterley's Lover* two years before, anticipated relatively little trouble. The Post Office banned *Tropic of Cancer* from the mails in early June, shortly after it appeared, but withdrew its ban a few days later. Then gradually law enforcement officials began to take action against the booksellers. Eventually some sixty court actions developed, with Grove Press, booksellers' and librarians' associations, and the American Civil Liberties Union leading the defense. (*Tropic of Capricorn* was first published in the United States by Grove Press in September 1962. But this publication caused relatively little excitement and no new lawsuits. In the first three months some 25,000 hard-cover copies were sold—as compared with 100,000 hard-bound copies of *Tropic of Cancer* in its first year.)

The legal history of *Tropic of Cancer* is the subject of a book in itself. Suffice it to say that trials and decisions varied widely and generated a great deal of confused discussion of freedom of speech, morals, mores, religion, obscenity, and so on. The position of the critics was clearer than most: the book, whether they liked it or not, was unquestionably a literary work and not a pornographic effort to make money.

I have tried to give some indication of the critics' reaction to the American publication of *Tropic of Cancer* and of the role they played in the ensuing tumult. First, two reviews suggest the reception accorded the book. Harry T. Moore, whose review appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*, is best known for his work on D. H. Lawrence, but he has long been interested in Miller; his review is representative of the favorable reactions. Stanley Kauffmann wrote his review for the *New Republic*, to which he is a contributing editor. A novelist himself, Kauffmann has reservations about the book's merits and about the exaggerated claims that have been made on its behalf.

Next, the critics were called to the witness stand. One of the first and most significant hearings was held in Boston, September 26-28, 1961. The defense called a battery of distinguished professors, including, as its principal witnesses, Harry T. Moore, Mark Schorer, and Harry Levin. I have taken excerpts from the testimony of Schorer and Levin, reproducing the court reporter's transcript, with a few minor corrections made by the witnesses. Like the book reviewers, they took different positions, Schorer more enthusiastic, Levin harboring reservations. Despite their testimony, the Boston court ruled *Tropic of Cancer* obscene, but the decision was reversed by a higher court in July 1962.

Perhaps the most protracted trial was held in Los Angeles early in 1962, with scores of witnesses appearing on both sides. The statement by Aldous Huxley was prepared at the request of Lawrence Clark Powell, himself a witness, but never presented, such testimony being held hearsay evidence. *Tropic of Cancer* was ruled obscene by the Los Angeles jury, but the decision is being appealed.

In Chicago another major case ended in favor of *Tropic of Cancer*. Elmer Gertz, who won that case, is not only a distinguished lawyer, best known for obtaining the release of Nathan Leopold, but co-author of a biography of Frank Harris. He kindly agreed to write an original essay for this collection, speaking not only for his profession but for himself, as an admirer of Henry Miller.

Finally, Henry Miller himself was good enough to write an essay for the critics. His replies to two of them, Edmund Wilson and Lawrence Durrell, appeared in the two previous sections. It is only fitting that he should now have the last word and put a cap on the milkbottle, as he expressed it in his letter to Durrell. He may never get around to writing *Draco and the Ecliptic*, but at least we have this postscript.

## FROM UNDER THE COUNTER TO FRONT SHELF

*Harry T. Moore*

SINCE *Tropic of Cancer* first appeared in Paris as a paperback twenty-seven years ago, it has been smuggled into English-speaking countries which turn their Customs inspectors into censors. The high praise of such writers as T. S. Eliot, George Orwell, Edmund Wilson and Herbert Read made it contraband of uncommon quality. Now the book has at last become available in the author's native country.

It was Henry Miller's first published volume, and it is as good as anything he has turned out since. It glows with the joy of discovery: I can write! Its engaging first-person narrative, the monologue of a man who draws people to him, tells the story of an American expatriate—not a Henry James gentleman in a Place Vendome hotel, but rather a Left Bank vagabond merrily sponging on his friends. Like him, they are members of the international, semiliterary, Parisian-tenement set, and they enjoy having him around.

All of them, particularly the narrator, have frequent, erotic adventures with every type of woman from the local *poules* to rich American widows. Every bit of this is set down graphically, with precise physical details and Old English locutions employed both descriptively and conversationally. Yet, with cinematic abruptness, the narrative often switches from amatory scenes to lyric evocations of the *faubourg* soft in the

dusk or the river streaked with lights. The style throughout is plain, though always energetic and vivid, with split-angled Braquelike images rising from the hard texture of American speech.

The Miller man, here and in later books, is in effect the descendant of Dostoevsky's Underground Man, without his nastiness, and of Rilke's Malte Laurids Brigge, without his fastidiousness. Miller's hero even has his feminine ideal, the American girl here called Mona, who recurs in his other books under a slightly different name; and although he marries her, she remains elusive. Yet his hectic devotion to her doesn't stop him from having all those other jubilantly recorded love affairs.

How different Miller's books are from those of Rousseau, who designated his biography as *Confessions*—the Rousseau of paranoid snufflings, who was guilt-haunted all his life because in early youth he had let a servant girl take the blame for a ribbon he had stolen. This is not meant to detract from Rousseau's stature as a writer, but merely to point out that Miller's joyful self-exposure is of quite another kind, unhampered by guilt. The *Tropic of Cancer* man is capable of acridness, but for the most part he moves from one escapade to another with the easy, conscienceless zest of a child. It might be said of him, as Yeats said of Miller's American forerunners and true masters, Whitman and Emerson, that he lacks the vision of evil in his assertion of self-reliance, in his song of himself.

He has been a generally liberating influence upon other writers, for many of his values, particularly his attacks upon standardization and his reverence for life, have been widely circulated and adopted, if only unconsciously. Overtly, his influence is most apparent upon celebrants of rootlessness such as the beatniks, or upon Lawrence Durrell, whose later works are the

outgrowth of his *The Black Book*, which in its turn is an outgrowth of Miller. Durrell says of Miller: "American literature today begins and ends with the meaning of what he has done." Of course to many readers *Tropic of Cancer*, strong language and all, may seem dated, but perhaps to many others the publication of the book here and now will reemphasize its enduring freshness.

Henry Miller, who is now in his seventieth year, was a latecomer to literature. Sometime between apprenticeship as a tailor in the 14th Ward of Brooklyn, and his floating existence in the 14th Arrondissement of Paris, Miller held down an executive position in the philistine-bourgeois-square world, for he put in several years as a Western Union employment manager in New York—which gives his escape into the ragged geometry of Montparnasse a special Gauguinesque flavor.

After *Tropic of Cancer* he wrote other volumes calculated to make the Customs men increase their vigilance, notably *Black Spring* (1936) and *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939), which in theme and treatment are on a level with *Tropic of Cancer*. At the time of World War II Miller returned to the United States, where he brought out several "harmless" books, including *The Colossus of Maroussi* (1941), an account of his travels through Greece with Lawrence Durrell, and *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945), a report of his wartime journeys through America. He then settled in California, with little money; but suddenly the G. I.'s discovered his European books, which began to sell faster than they could be reprinted.

Overseas publication continued with the trilogy, *The Rosy Crucifixion*, which, like most of Miller's pre-war books, cannot be imported into the United States. *The Rosy Crucifixion*, which deals with the author's

earlier New York life, tends to be monotonous in a way that the preceding autobiographies were not. In the *Tropic* and *Black Spring* volumes, the erotic sections are elaborately explicit, but they are also frequently ceremonial; the more recent books, although they contain magnetic narrative passages and scenes of high Miller comedy, too often become a wearying chronicle of sexual acrobatics.

The question comes up in relation to all these Miller volumes and particularly *Tropic of Cancer*, the first one to be put before the general public: Are they—besides being anarchic, anti-military, anti-prison, anti-money and anti-respectability—are they obscene? Miller himself, in his essay, "Obscenity and the Law of Reflection," quotes D. H. Lawrence to the effect that obscenity is almost impossible to define. In recent legal decisions concerning Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the literary quality of the book has usually motivated a favorable verdict. Of course Lawrence had a special purpose in *Lady Chatterley*, which he intended to be therapeutic for an age he regarded as sexually sick, and it must be said that he might well have been horrified by parts of Miller's work; they are indeed tenuous distinctions along the borders of the salacious. Yet, to consider for a moment one of the great classics of vulgarity, was Chaucer ever better, in his treatment of character and situation, than in his Fescennine masterpiece, "The Miller's Tale"?

Chaucer was simply telling a story, as Henry Miller is simply reflecting life. And if, in the Miller essay mentioned above, he quotes Romans XIV:14, in his own behalf, he is not doing so irreverently, for he is a deeply religious man and a respecter of all religions. The section he cites from St. Paul's letter to the Romans includes the famous statement, "There is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth

any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean."

Now it must be granted that parts of *Tropic of Cancer* will hammer away at some of the strongest of stomachs, even in this epoch in which so many books are really scabrous. However, in the present volume, among other things, Miller projects with gusto some of the great comic scenes of modern literature. There are, for example, the Dijon sequence in which the narrator goes to teach for a while in a broken-down provincial lycée; the last episode of the book, which involves the Miller man and one of his friends and a French family in a crazy farce; and, above all, the scenes describing a Gandhi disciple looking for fun in Paris. If literary quality is a criterion, these passages run far ahead of any considerations of obscenity; in themselves they guarantee that Henry Miller is an authentic, a significant author whose ripest work has been too long forbidden in his homeland.

## AN OLD SHOCKER COMES HOME

*Stanley Kauffmann*

HENRY MILLER's *Tropic of Cancer* is now published in this country in an unlavish edition of 318 pages set in big type at a price of \$7.50—and this in spite of a large first printing. The interest of the prices is that here it relates to the content of book—not, as is usual, to its length or format. The publisher knows that the public knows the book's reputation and is willing to pay much more than is currently charged for books of similar production cost. This gives, from the start, a different atmosphere to its publication. Rather than call it cashing in on prurience, let us say that the publisher is asking the purchaser to make a contribution to a defense fund in case of legal prosecution, although no provision is made for refunding, say, three dollars per copy if the publisher is unmolested.

The book itself, first issued in 1934 in Paris (in English) is an autobiographical first novel recounting the experiences, sensations, thought of Miller, a penniless American in the Paris of the early thirties. It is not so much a novel as an intense journal, written daily about what was happening to him daily, full of emotion recollected in proximity, as he scrounged for food, devoured books, conversed volubly, and flung himself into numerous beds. It is formless, in the sense that it could have continued indefinitely, but then

Miller is an enemy of form. He writes of a Ravel composition: "Suddenly it all died down. It was as if [Ravel] remembered, in the midst of his antics, that he had on a cutaway suit. He arrested himself. A great mistake, in my humble opinion. Art consists in going the full length. If you start with the drums you have to end with the dynamite, or TNT. Ravel sacrificed something for form, for a vegetable that people must digest before going to bed."

The "full length" is Miller's ideal. Frankness of fact and devotion to truth are not always concurrent, but Miller has, within his powers, both of these. He says on an early page: "There is only one thing which interests me vitally now, and that is the recording of all that which is omitted in books."

He had been a husband and a hireling in various jobs in New York and elsewhere, always a hungry reader with literary ambitions, when at 39 he broke loose and, without money, went alone to Paris to write. He swore he would never take a job again. In fact he takes two in this book—as a proofreader on the *Paris Tribune* and as an English teacher in Dijon. But the point was made—he had broken away.

Essentially that is what the book is: a mirror-image of the testimony which is given at revival meetings. There you can hear about men who got right with God; this man got right with art and sex and the use of his brain and time. Like all converts, he is on fire. Like all converts, he simply will not leave your lapels alone. Thus he is a bit tedious. Because he came fairly late in life to a personally valid ethic, he cannot believe that anyone he talks to has ever done it before him.

The book is a fierce celebration of his enlightened freedom, which is to say his acceptance of real responsibilities instead of merely respectable ones. But in the course of this paean he exhorts us mercilessly with

such discoveries as: sex can be fun; America is commercialized and doomed; civilization must refurbish its values or perish. (Edmund Wilson has called the book "an epitaph for the whole generation that migrated to Europe after the war.") All this now suffers, of course, from the passage of time. These burning messages have been the commonplaces of novelists, most of them inferior to Miller, for at least a couple of decades. But could these views have been startling even in 1934? This was eight years after the publication of a much more widely read novel of Americans in Paris, *The Sun Also Rises*. Hemingway is as unlike Miller as is imaginable in temperament, but surely the new liberty and the dark apocalypse are in his book.

How Miller rages at us. And what is his chief complaint? That we are not like him, living like him, desiring and perceiving like him. A prime function of art is criticism, and if the artist in question has merit, he certainly *is* a superior person and modest coughs are out of order. But the smuggest bourgeois has no smugness like that of the self-consciously liberated bohemian. It tainted Gauguin and D. H. Lawrence; it infects Miller.

He is often compared to Whitman, which must please him because he thinks Whitman "that one lone figure which America has produced in the course of her brief life" (despite the fact that he began by worshiping Dreiser). There is considerable basis for the comparison, especially in attitude. Miller sees no democratic vistas and certainly does *not* hear America singing, but he, too, is a buddy of the universe and privy to its secrets, calling on the rest of us to be as open-shirted and breeze-breasting as himself. Also there is in Miller, although on a much lower level than in Whitman, a feeling of settled iconoclasm, of

artistic revolt made stock-in-trade. There are attempts at bardic sweep, some of them successful, and there is Whitmanesque rejoicing in the smack of wine and flesh.

Sometimes Miller uses language stupidly (he calls Paris "more eternal" than Rome). Sometimes, as in the rhapsody on Matisse, he writes a symbolist poem with a heat that carries us across its weaker passages. Or he can transmute sensation into images that propagate like guppies. For example, one day, broke and hungry, he finds a concert-ticket and uses it.

My mind is curiously alert; it's as though my skull had a thousand mirrors inside it. My nerves are taut, vibrant! the notes are like glass balls dancing on a million jets of water. I've never been to a concert before on such an empty belly. Nothing escapes me, not even the tiniest pin falling. It's as though I had no clothes on and every pore of my body was a window and all the windows open and the light flooding my gizzards. I can feel the light curving under the vault of my ribs and my ribs hang there over a hollow nave trembling with reverberations. How long this lasts I have no idea; I have lost all sense of time and place. After what seems like an eternity there follows an interval of semiconsciousness balanced by such a calm that I feel a great lake inside me, a lake of iridescent sheen, cool as jelly; and over this lake, rising in great swooping spirals, there emerge flocks of birds of passage with long slim legs and brilliant plumage. Flock after flock surge up from the cool, still surface of the lake and, passing under my clavicles, lose themselves in the white sea of space. And then slowly, very slowly, as if an old woman in a white cap were going the rounds of my body, slowly the windows are closed and my organs drop back into place."

I have quoted this at length because it is a good cross section of his style. "The tiniest pin" and "after what seems an eternity" are careless spewing; but the

“old woman in a white cap” is orphic.

This is Miller. Narrative is not his forte; his characterizations are sketchy; his philosophy is jejune. It is in pressing his whole existence against the warm wax of his prose and leaving there its complete imprint that he is at his best—in following every quiver of sentience to its source or destination with phrases that sometimes add up to a gorgeous fabric. Karl Shapiro, in an introductory essay streaked with gibberish, says that “everything [Miller] has written is a poem in the best as well as in the broadest sense of the word.” This is a sentimental and foolishly inclusive judgment, but it points in the right direction.

Shapiro says that Miller writes with “complete ease and naturalness” about sex, as Lawrence and Joyce did not. To me, there is (speaking only of this book) much less sex than bravado. As far as specific language is concerned, Lawrence thought there was something thaumaturgic in four-letter words and had Mellors speak them therapeutically. Joyce wrote down the words that his miraculous surgery of the psyche revealed. Miller employs them—mostly *outside* of dialogue—to demonstrate somewhat ostentatious emancipation and contempt for slaves of convention.

Anyway, to talk about complete naturalness in the use of those words by a member of our society is arrant nonsense. The only person who could use them completely naturally would be a mental defective unaware of taboos. The foulest-mouthed longshoreman knows that he is using naughty words and is wallowing in them. Miller uses them in an exultation very much like that of a college boy away from home for the first time.

Proof of his lack of naturalness about it lies in his avoidance of earthy language when he talks about his great love, Mona. Virtually every other girl in the

book, well or lightly regarded, is referred to at some time or other as a c—t. Making Mona an exception seems to show not only some residual puritanism but exhibitionism in the other cases. In fact, before one is far along in the book, the plentiful four-letter words become either irritating or tiresome. I thought of Robert Graves' remark that in the British Army the adjective "f——ing" has come to mean only a signal that a noun is approaching.

Lawrence Durrell, no more reluctant than numerous other foreigners to tell Americans what their best works are, says that "American literature today begins and ends with the meaning of what [Miller] has done." Further: "To read *Tropic of Cancer* is to understand how shockingly romantic all European writing after Rousseau has become." (Durrell, of all artists, must know that "romantic" is a qualitative not a pejorative term.) These statements are typical of the—to me—inflated praise that this book has evoked. I hazard a couple of guesses at extrinsic reasons for this. First, when a gifted man writes a prosecutable book, it is often over-lauded as a tactical move by those interested in the freedom of letters—especially those who hold that sex is Beautiful, not sexy. Second, possibly these statements are, as much as anything else, a tribute to Miller's purity of commitment, to his abhorrence of the pietisms of Literature and the proprieties of the Literary Life, to his willingness—if not down-right eagerness—to suffer for the right to live and write as he chooses. His is no small spirit; it is just not as large as some have told us.

Here, then, is his first novel, available (*pro tem*, at least) in his own country twenty-seven years after its publication abroad. Durrell believes that its place is next to *Moby Dick*, which seems to me a hurtful thing to say about a frisky minnow of a book that

ought not to be compared with leviathans. Far from being "the jewel and nonpareil" of American literature (Durrell again), Miller cannot be put near such twentieth-century novelists as Dreiser, Fitzgerald, early Dos Passos, early Hemingway—let alone Faulkner—with-out unfair diminution.

This book belongs, modestly but securely, in the American tradition of profundity-through-deliberate-simplicities that has its intellectual roots in Thoreau and continues through such men as Whitman and Sherwood Anderson until, in a changed time, it thinks it needs to go abroad to breathe. Miller stands under his Paris street-lamp, defiantly but genially drunk, trolling his catch mixed of beauty and banality and recurrent bawdry—a little pathetic because he thinks he is a discoverer and doesn't realize that he is only a tourist on a well-marked tour. We see him at last as an appealingly zestful, voracious, talented hick.

COMMONWEALTH OF  
MASSACHUSETTS *vs.*  
TROPIC OF CANCER

WITNESS: *Mark Schorer*

Q. Have you read *Tropic of Cancer*, the Exhibit 1 in this case? A. Yes.

Q. In your opinion, does the work have literary value?

A. The answer is, "Yes." May I amplify?

Q. I wish you would. A. I read it most recently last April when I was flying to Majorca to serve on a jury for a new international prize to be awarded to a novelist for a specific novel, and my nomination was Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* on the grounds that Henry Miller, in my mind, is inadequately recognized in the United States. However, the European members of the jury argued this man is too great, too well known in literary history; we need to give this prize to some new, younger man who is unknown. I say this only to indicate the difference between the European reputation of Henry Miller and his reputation here.

Q. Would you say the European reputation was a warranted reputation, in your opinion? A. Entirely.

Q. That Henry Miller is a great literary figure? A. He is.

Q. And what about the book, *Tropic of Cancer*? What is its value as literature? A. Primarily, I should say

its style, although I suppose that Henry Miller would not approve of the word. The book is written with a kind of energy and verve and spontaneity that is very rare in American writing. I sympathize, too, with what I regard as its theme. Its plot is the adventures of an American in Paris, as Dr. Moore testified, but it has a theme, too, it seems to me, and the theme is that the value of life exists in the act of living, that we live only in the instant moment; and that seems to me what Miller was saying, and the language, the reason that I put so much emphasis on the energy of the language, is that one is made to feel that theme through the very language, that kind of exuberance.

Q. And would you say that, in connection with the answer you have just given, Miller deals with the underground man in an attempt to state more strongly his position, that life even under these circumstances—— A. Life, particularly. The point is, as Miller tells at the outset, is that he has divested himself of every connection and responsibility in order to be free to do nothing but live, with no money, no obligations, no residence, nothing except himself for life, and at that point he says, "I am the happiest man in the world." Those circumstances, of course, most of us would find quite uncomfortable.

Q. You indicated that Miller would disapprove of the use of the word "style." A. Yes.

Q. In connection with his writing. A. Because this is really a work of art written out of a spirit of anti-art, as he also tells us. He is going to throw out in that—and I call it a novel, although it's no doubt an auto-biographical novel—he is going to throw out every literary convention that one associates with the usual novel, and in that sense he says it's a kick at art. But the fact remains that it emerges as a work of art, although of a highly individual character.

Q. There was some testimony this morning about the use of the four-letter words in the book. You heard Professor Moore's testimony, did you not? A. Yes.

Q. You agree that the use of those words is artistically necessary to this book? A. To the intention that I have described, I think, absolutely, and any other language would falsify it.

Q. And would you say that Mr. Miller could have substituted any of the so-called acceptable words like "intercourse" or "cohabit" in place of the words used?

A. No.

Q. Or "excrement" where used? A. No. Those words are all too academic for this context.

Q. Now, you are familiar, of course, with contemporary writing and contemporary criticism. A. Yes.

Q. Would you say that there is a tendency towards greater freedom in expression about sexual matters in writing today than several years ago? A. Yes. I would say certainly since the end of the Second World War.

Q. Would you say that this book, *Tropic of Cancer*, is unique in its use of language? A. No. It may be more insistent, but those words are all to be found in other novels.

Q. Do you find that the repetition of the language in any way affects your attitude towards it or the effect of it? A. Well, I think, as Professor Moore said, if the words shock on the first page, they no longer do so on the fiftieth. Is that what you had in mind?

Q. Yes. That in point of fact the intention of the author is to make them natural and commonplace?

A. Yes.

#### CROSS-EXAMINATION

Q. Now, you testified that you did not think Miller could use language more acceptable to people generally. A. Yes.

Q. You feel that the sex and the sex episodes are an integral part of the book. A. Very much.

Q. And do they add anything to the literary quality of the book? A. They make the literary achievement complete in a way that it would not be without them.

Q. So that you say that there is a literary achievement to the book aside from the sex and the sex episodes.

A. Oh, yes.

Q. But they perfect the literary achievement.

A. They are very central to this whole sense of the vital act of living that I have been talking about. I mean, what is more central?

Q. Well, would you say that the book concerns itself with a series of adventures in living? A. Yes.

Q. And isn't it so that the book would have literary merit if only some of those adventures were portrayed in the book rather than all? A. Yes, but it would be a different book.

Q. It would be a different book, but it would still have literary merit. A. I don't think Miller can write anything that hasn't literary merit, but may I say that Miller has written many other books with impeccably conventional English. There is only this book, *Tropic of Capricorn*, and then a trilogy that he is working on that uses that kind of language. When he is addressing himself to other subjects, he writes beautifully conventional prose.

Q. He writes beautiful conventional prose. A. Well, he writes the English of an educated man.

Q. Would you say in *Tropic of Cancer* he did not employ the language of an educated man? A. Well, not an educated man walking through cocktail parties and tea parties, as you may say, because he is writing, as you say, as a bum.

Q. Well, can you tell us what kind of a motive did the author have in writing this kind of book? A. I think

his motive was to give expression to his own sense of life, and you can't really talk about this book in any other terms because that's all that it is. It's a kind of chant, if you wish.

Q. You feel that he simply wrote what he saw.

A. And experienced, yes.

Q. But, of course, he reserved to himself the descriptions of those experiences, did he not? A. Yes.

Q. And so wasn't it possible for him to relate his experiences in more acceptable language? A. Not for his purposes, no.

Q. Not for his purposes. A. No.

Q. You feel that the sex and the sex episodes and their descriptions are vitally important to this book.

A. Absolutely central, I would say.

Q. Well, are you familiar with other books of this period that described the Montparnasse section of Paris?

A. Well, I could think of other novels, but they are nothing like this one.

Q. Nothing like this one. A. Well, I mean, there's *The Sun Also Rises*, which is about expatriates in Paris. There, as you remember it, the hero is incapable of sexual experience, so there isn't any for him. That's his tragedy.

Q. Well, is there any detail of description concerning sex and sexual acts in the other book? A. No, because the story as I remember, is told pretty much from the point of view of—I have forgotten his name—whoever the central character is, but you can find other Hemingway novels in which the sexual act is certainly very explicitly spelled out, and I am thinking of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and I would say that in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which is a novel about political Spain, there is less justification for those sexual scenes than there is in this.

THE COURT: You say they are as explicit in Heming-

way's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* as they are in this book?

THE WITNESS: They are explicit to a point, and then they become metaphorical and the earth shakes in—

THE COURT: Then it leaves it to the reader's imagination instead of spelling it all out.

THE WITNESS: Well, yes.

Q. In the sex and sex episodes in this book, does the author leave anything to your imagination? A. Very little.

Q. Very little. He is very explicit, is he not? A. Yes.

Q. When somebody enters a bedroom in this book, you do not find the scene shifting, do you? A. No.

Q. You go in with the author. A. Or the "I" character.

Q. Now, Professor Schorer, this book is written for the most part in the first person. A. Yes.

Q. As a writer and as an author, do you find that the first person is an easier vehicle with which to relate sex and sex episodes? A. No, I don't. In fact, I think it's more difficult than the third person. My own third novel was a first-person novel, and what you have to do when you are writing in the first person is maintain absolutely the point of view of that person, and this puts a terrific control on your materials and on what you can say because you can only say what that "I" could know, and at least in my experience it's a very difficult device. Whether it was so for Henry Miller, I don't know.

[Several pages of testimony omitted at this point.]

Q. Well, do you think that Henry Miller may have introduced these sex episodes because he had his eye on the box office, so to speak? A. No, And the fact is that Miller never attempted to publish this book in the United States, and I am told that even when he was approached for this edition he was reluctant.

Q. You mean he did take the money reluctantly, did he not? A. Well, I can't really speak on this matter because it is the publisher's affair, and I don't know the details, but I know that he never tried to publish it on his own, and for years in Europe it was little known. It was only when the G. I.'s came to France that the book began to sell like mad there, and that was ten years after its publication.

Q. Well, wouldn't you say that the detailed descriptions of sex episodes lend themselves to the sale of this book? A. I don't know. I suppose they do, but I am sure that money was not in Miller's mind, who lives one of the simplest lives of all men. He lives like a peasant by preference. I don't know the motives that impel people to buy that book.

Q. Well, assuming that Miller omitted the sexual episodes, would the book be as well known today?

A. Probably not, because it has been a kind of international scandal for many years.

Q. It has been an international scandal? A. The fact that it could not be imported into the United States for so long, so that every college boy who went to Europe brought back a copy.

Boston, September 26, 1961

COMMONWEALTH OF  
MASSACHUSETTS *vs.*  
**TROPIC OF CANCER**

WITNESS: *Harry Levin*

Q. Have you read the *Tropic of Cancer* by Henry Miller? A. I have.

Q. Can you describe the book briefly, the theme of the book? A. The theme of the book?

Q. Yes, sir. A. Well, I should think the title had something to do with the theme, and, as I interpret it, the passage indicating the meaning of the title comes at the end of one section where the narrator is going down into the subway, I think, and he sees signs about cancer, and this is connected by a kind of poetic fantasy in his mind with the locality, the Tropic of Cancer, and with the place he has been describing; and I take it it means by that and by the symbol of the crab a certain erosion, a sickness, certainly, of modern society; and it is my view, though I think others would dispute it, that he is concerned to diagnose that sickness of modern society. He gives us a good many case histories of it in the course of the book, and he concerns himself with what can only be described as Parisian low life.

There is, of course, a well-authenticated literary category for the description of Parisian low life which goes back as far as the Middle Ages and to one of the great

French poets, François Villon, who wrote very elegant poems about such themes as prostitutes; and then, of course, I would also ally his book to what is known in literary history as picaresque fiction, fiction that deals with the lives of rogues in the underworld. A good many examples of that, of course, could be given which are prominent in the history of literature.

Bohemia—Paris as the Bohemian center for raffish artists—has been a theme ever since the novel, on which the more famous opera is based, came out in the middle of the nineteenth century. I would say that all this is the context of the book.

More immediately, I would think of a predecessor to Miller's book in the form of Ernest Hemingway's novel, *The Sun Also Rises*.

Q. You were speaking before about the literary antecedents of *Tropic of Cancer*. The authors Dostoevsky, Whitman, and Mark Twain were mentioned earlier in this proceeding, and analogies to their writing and Henry Miller's were made. Do you think those analogies were accurate or reasonable? A. I think there are relationships. *Tropic of Cancer* is a very literary book, and the author is constantly mentioning these other writers, measuring himself by them, using them to set his standards, indicating that he wants to go beyond them in power and in violence, and so on.

I think there's no doubt they served as a source of literary inspiration to him. I would think Walt Whitman was an influence on him. I see much in his attempt to include so many aspects of life that don't usually get into polite literature that is Whitmanesque. Walt pushed to the extreme, a kind of down-at-the-heels, Left Bank Walt Whitman.

But I think there's also the rhapsody, the concern

for America, although from a great distance. It comes out more strongly, however, in Miller's other writings.

Q. In your opinion, does the book *Tropic of Cancer* have literary value? A. Yes.

Q. Are Miller's talents as a writer revealed in the book in any way? Does the book evidence any talent?

A. I think he shows considerable talent as a very special sort of writer; not, I may say, the kind of writer I personally prefer, but I find as a student of narration, let us say, that he is a very remarkable storyteller. These storytellers are very much in the smoking-room tradition. They tell the kind of stories that don't very often get written down, but it does seem to me that he does have a definite literary skill of a very special kind.

Q. You indicated a moment ago that Miller as a writer has no special appeal to you as an individual, yet you recognized his literary talents. Is that an accurate restatement of what you said? A. Yes.

Q. *Tropic of Cancer* uses a number of four-letter words, words that are equivalent to "fornicate," "excrement," words that are considered, as Professor Bloomfield testified yesterday, not acceptable in certain segments of society. Is the use of that language, in your opinion, necessary in this book? A. It is. I can't imagine the same effect, dealing with characters of the kind that are described, being obtained by the use of more polite synonyms.

Q. Would you say it was necessary to the literary design? A. Very much so.

Q. Apart from characterizing the people who are written of. A. It is, indeed.

Q. It is necessary to the literary design. Could the same design have been accomplished by the use of the words that are generally accepted such as "fornicate"

or "coitus" or "cohabit"? A. No. Miller explicitly states that his intention is to record the things that are usually omitted from the books.

#### CROSS-EXAMINATION

Q. Professor, are you a member of the Harvard Faculty Club? A. Yes.

Q. Have you heard those words used in the Harvard Faculty Club while you have been there? A. I can't specifically recall. I have heard those words used often, though I have no particular association with where I heard them.

Q. Would you or would you not associate them with the Harvard Faculty Club? A. I would not particularly associate them with the Harvard Faculty Club.

Q. Now, you have written several books, have you not, Professor? A. Yes.

Q. Do any of your books deal with sex or sex episodes? A. No, but, of course, they are—

Q. Just answer "Yes" or "No." Now, you said that the theme of *Tropic of Cancer* was sickness of modern society, is that correct? A. Yes.

Q. Now, are you referring to the sickness of the society in which he involved himself? Is that the sick society you are talking about? A. I am not quite sure of the extent to which he does involve himself in that society. It would seem to me that he was an observer of it.

Q. Well, consider two societies: the society in which Miller involved himself in the Montparnasse section of Paris and the rest of the world. Which sick society were you referring to? A. I'm sorry, sir, but I still don't really accept your terms. I do not agree that he involves himself in the society he writes about.

THE COURT: You don't believe this is autobiographical.

THE WITNESS: No, I do not, sir.

THE COURT: In that respect you differ with other colleagues on the campus. I don't mean on the Harvard campus, but other campuses.

THE WITNESS: Well, it's difficult to say how much is observation and how much is experience.

THE COURT: No. I was just wondering as to whether you have the same view as to whether this was largely autobiographical.

THE WITNESS: I don't know Mr. Miller, but I give him the benefit of the doubt.

Q. Well, which doubt is that, Professor?

THE COURT: That it's not autobiographical, is that it, in the episodes themselves?

THE WITNESS: That he is standing back. My assumption is that he stands back and views what he writes about in a somewhat moralistic position.

Q. Well, isn't it written in the first person? A. Many books are in the first person.

Q. Well, is this book written in the first person? A. Yes, it is.

Q. And does he not himself engage in numerous sexual episodes? A. Again, there cannot be an answer which identifies "he" and "himself" with Henry Miller.

Q. Well, would you call this book a work of fiction, then? A. I would.

Q. This is a work of fiction. A. Yes, sir.

Q. Now, can you tell us whether or not, in your opinion, there is any exaggeration in this book? A. I think there is likely to be. There is in most works of fiction. That's one of the reasons they are called "fiction."

Q. Now, you talked about the four-letter words being necessary to the literary design of this work. A. I did.

Q. Can you tell us what is the literary design of this work? A. I have taken a couple of stabs at it. I will

be glad to try further, if you wish. Since you use the term, I don't think it's a very carefully designed work. I think it's a rather loose sequence of fictional reminiscences. As I have said, I think it starts with a writer's life abroad, but plunges pretty directly into a kind of underworld. I think it is designed to show up western culture at a late stage by dealing with the most ignoble sides of it. I think it also has passages of some critical and philosophic purport in which the author endeavors to take a more positive view. I know there are some interpreters of the book who end by thinking that he does and that it is a very healthy book. In my opinion, it is a somewhat morbid book, but a serious one.

Q. It's a morbid book, in your opinion. A. Yes, indeed.

THE COURT: His complete answer is that it's a morbid book, but a serious book.

Isn't that your complete answer?

THE WITNESS: Yes, your Honor.

Q. Well, it is morbid in a sense, is it not? A. I would say so, yes.

Q. And would it be your opinion that it deals with sex and sexual desire in a morbid way? A. Here, again, I am afraid I shall have to distinguish between what it deals with and the way it deals with them. I don't think so. I think the author is saying, in effect, "All this is morbid. I am fed up with it."

[Part of testimony omitted here.]

I believe that the right to read is one of the most precious of the freedoms that we are guaranteed. I don't think that it is challenged by established classics or by works which are comparatively innocuous in their subject matter. It is precisely with works which are on the borderline that we get into arguments of

this kind. As a citizen of this Commonwealth, I must say I feel ashamed at being denied the privilege of reading a book which is being talked about seriously all over the rest of the world and of judging it for myself.

Q. Well, I take it, then, you are opposed to literary censorship. A. In general, yes.

Q. And is that why you are here testifying today? A. I can't give you a completely accurate picture of my mind, but that—

Q. Do your best. A. That would be a present element. That would be an element in my attitude.

Q. That would be an element in your testifying here today. A. I am concerned with the book, but I would agree I am even more concerned with the issue.

Q. You are incensed that this proceeding has been brought against *Tropic of Cancer*, are you not? A. I wouldn't use quite so hot an adjective.

Q. Well, you are opposed to this proceeding, are you not? A. I am, sir. I am not opposed to this proceeding. I am opposed to the banning of *Tropic of Cancer*.

Boston, September 28, 1961

## STATEMENT FOR THE LOS ANGELES TRIAL

*Aldous Huxley*

THAT WHICH MIGHT BE and that which is—these are the two fundamental themes of all literature. At its highest, the literature of what might be is prophetic idealism; at its lowest, it is mere wishful thinking and compensatory phantasy. The literature of that which is comprises realism of every kind—realism in relation to nature, to society, to individual behaviour and personal experience. Sexual behaviour as observed from the outside and sexual behaviour as subjective experience are inescapable facts. As such they come within the scope of the literature of that which is. When these facts are described and discussed in the aseptic language of science, nobody objects. When they are described and discussed in the language of metaphor and elegant periphrasis, there are sometimes a few mild protests. But when a writer describes and discusses these same facts in colloquial language, in those locally tabooed words which everyone knows and many people habitually employ, he is apt to get into grave trouble. Determined efforts are made to ban his book and to punish those who dared to print, publish and sell it.

I am old enough to remember a time when many subjects now freely discussed were never mentioned in polite society, when many words now used by young

girls and their maiden aunts were regarded as too shocking to be uttered, much less committed to paper. It is therefore difficult for me to take too seriously the righteous indignation of those who would like to censor such books as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Tropic of Cancer*. So far as I am concerned, the worst that can be said about Henry Miller's strange and powerful novel is that, in many passages, it makes sex appear so extremely unattractive that impressionable young people might be driven by the reading of it into a revulsion of puritanism.

## HENRY MILLER AND THE LAW

*Elmer Gertz*

IN WHAT he styled a Chronology, Henry Miller dealt summarily and in a kind of clipped language with the events and personalities of his life, sometimes implying far more than he said. Thus he epitomized the year 1913, when he was not yet twenty-two years old and had achieved nothing: "Traveled through the West. Worked at odd jobs in endeavor to break with city life. Met Emma Goldman in San Diego: turning point in life." And then the year 1914: "Returned to New York, working with father in tailor shop; tried to turn business over to the employees. Met here first great writer, Frank Harris. Influenced by father's cronies, all interesting and eccentric characters, mostly drunkards."

To me, a staid character of the law courts and libraries, too respectable for brawls and Mulligan stew, this means that Henry Miller, in his youth, as in his middle years, was at war with institutionalized society. At first he was what we have since then described, in the jargon of Hollywood, as a rebel without a cause—a James Dean character, a Hemingway of undisciplined creative yearnings.

Emma Goldman, the serious-minded Anarchist, the dedicated free lover, the earnest doubter, gave meaning and even a measure of discipline to his rebellion. He

was more convinced than ever that the so-called rule of law, the acceptance of the ways of ants, the surrender to the dull norms of dead or dormant men, these were not meant for him and could only kill the man within him, struggling, with little success at first, to find his means of self-expression.

Emma Goldman's influence made him realize gradually that running hither and thither and satisfying all appetites of the senses were together only the overture, as it were, to the creative symphony. The real business of his life was finding himself, so that he might create what was peculiarly his own, and no one else's.

In a different way, the self-indulgent literary anarchist, Frank Harris, roaring and cooing about the great spiritual and creative personalities of the centuries—Jesus and Shakespeare and Frank Harris—emphasized the same truth for Miller. Government, law, business, money, society, conventions, mores, taboos, these and other phrases and practices, however thunderous in tone, denoted death, inanition, conformity, robbery, the diminution of his libido; they were the silly sirens in starched attire who distracted him from unexpressed but deeply felt goals.

This young man, at once convivial and shy, wild and mild, discovered that he had an ego, a very considerable one, and that it was the most important fact in the world for him. He had to live and be that ego every moment of every day, and to put it in words. The words were to be true; all the pretense was to be routed from his mind and thus from his pen. He could only express himself, and no one else. He might write in fictional form, but it was all to be autobiography, and not simply autobiographical. Thus, when some patronizing pedants opined that he was writing a kind of fictionalized autobiography, he pro-

tested, sometimes angrily; he was writing true autobiography, in many volumes and forms, and not fiction in any sense—even when he was inaccurate or played badminton with the facts or indulged in sur-realistic transports.

Being himself, being natural, being truthful, meant being at war with the law and the upholders of the legal order, be they lawyers, professors, clergymen, wives, or ordained oracles or respectables in any guise. It meant that, as an artist, he had to be oblivious of the rights, real or assumed, of friends and foes, men and women, the strong and the weak. All that could matter to him, all that could prevail, was the inner urge to put everybody and everything in writing for all the world to read. The only concession that he could make to the conventions was to conceal names and to scramble times, places and situations.

This is a sure recipe for disaster in a conventional world in which there are laws against libel ("the greater the truth, the greater the libel"); laws against invasions of the right of privacy; growing concern for appropriations of the right to one's name, likeness and personality; misdemeanors and sometimes felonies known as obscenity—limitations galore upon the freedom of utterance. The very obscurity of Miller in his earlier days, his absence from America, the unavailability of his books here, these circumstances shielded him from disaster; these and the luck which never seems to desert him—even in adversity. This scoffer at the laws of the earth seems to have some confidence in the stars. His interest in horoscopes is an expression of this.

He laughed, in triumph and assurance, when I told him once how fortunate he was that he had not been sued by those he had immortalized in his books.

He phrased it perfectly in a letter he wrote to his

Norwegian attorney when his book *Sexus* was condemned as obscene: "Guilty, in other words, because I am the way I am. The marvel is that I am walking about as a free man. I should have been condemned the moment I stepped out of my mother's womb."

I remember the great joy with which Miller wrote to me when he first read of Justice Black's pristine views of the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. It will be recalled that, in a widely quoted interview, the famous Supreme Court justice declared his complete and unconditional belief in the absolute freedom of expression—that men should be permitted to say what they please, unhampered by libel laws, obscenity statutes, or other man-made restraints. I was something in the nature of a hero when I was able to tell Miller that I had been present at the very time and place of the historic interview. Miller favors Blackian absolutes in the freedom of expression, not to protect himself against the law in the manner of a culprit, but in response to his inner compulsion to utter the truth, naked and unashamed, whether beautiful or ugly, and regardless of consequences.

Miller could never write in the involved manner of a Henry James or some precious creature of the literary journals. There is a masculine exigency about all that he has to say; it does not permit of feminine circumlocution. The words pour forth in a roar like the seed of a Rabelaisian giant, spraying the world with a rampant joy.

Professors William B. Lockhart and Robert C. McClure, the leading authorities on the law of obscenity, declared that the real test of the limitations of the laws on censorship would come with Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn* "or, per-

haps better yet for this purpose, his *Quiet Days in Clichy*." This opinion was expressed after the series of United States Supreme Court cases in the late 1950's, including *Roth*, *Butler* and *Smith*, which seemed to give ever narrower scope for book-banning. The authors did not mention *Sexus* (which Miller says he will never permit to be published here); but they had in mind the ruling of the California court, in the *Besig* case, holding that the two *Tropic* books are obscene.

If the sort of judicial mentality evinced in the *Besig* case had continued to prevail, few, if any, of the outspoken literary classics of our age could have been published in the United States; certainly not Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, nor, assuredly, the frank utterances of Miller. The *Besig* case was bad law even for its day, as I pointed out in the course of the legal arguments in our famous test case on *Tropic of Cancer* in the Superior Court of Cook County. It was based largely on the old, discredited English case (*Regina v. Hicklin*, decided in 1868!) in which a book was declared to be obscene when "judged merely by the effect of isolated excerpts upon particularly susceptible persons," instead of being considered as a whole, by contemporary community standards, by its effect on the average, normal, adult person. Worse than that, the self-righteous judges in the *Besig* case presumed to pass upon the character, or the morals, of Miller, the unorthodox ideas that outraged them, his sexual explicitness, and the use of four-letter words of Anglo-Saxon origin, and they gave little credence to the literary experts who held the *Tropic* books in high esteem.

The original ban in the *Besig* case was brought about by the United States Customs office, which in the course of time (under the enlightened tutelage of Mr. Huntington Cairns) revised its view with respect

to the *Tropic* books, and, acting on a recommendation of the Department of Justice in 1961, cleared the books for importation. The Post Office Department concurred, so that the book could be advertised, sold and delivered through the United States mails. A New York District Court judge named Murphy agreed, as did the Attorney General of New Jersey and law enforcement officers in several other large communities. Normally, this would have meant the end of all efforts to ban the book, *Tropic of Cancer*, when it was published by Grove Press, Inc.

So far as I recall the history of book banning in the United States, when one upper court (particularly a Federal court), or the Post Office, or Customs, clears a book, then that is the end of the matter; no local luminaries superimpose their lowlier views. But in connection with *Tropic of Cancer*, it was a fight every inch of the way, with over sixty suits of various kinds and results. New York City, San Francisco and Washington, D. C., might permit the book, but not Syracuse, Los Angeles, and Boston—until the upper courts began the process of setting aside the edicts of the tiny tyrants. Why this local rebellion against the views of Washington? What does it portend? Is it simply an extension of the fight against the integration of the schools? By God, they are not going to tell us what to do about books or schools!

It seems to me that our day is witnessing the last gasp of legal censorship of literary material; all that will remain under police or court surveillance is hardcore pornography, the wholly indefensible, under-the-counter, commercial exploitation of “dirt for dirt’s sake.” The individuals and groups accustomed to superimposing their views, be they Catholic or Baptist or of any other denomination, are reluctant to accept this new development and, like Canute of old, are fighting

desperately to hold back the tide. The triumph of Henry Miller will mark the fullest extension of the freedom to read, because of all first-rate writers of our generation he goes furthest in manner, means and substance.

As the attorney in the successful Chicago proceeding, which went on for a considerable period before a singularly enlightened judge, Chief Justice Samuel B. Epstein of the Superior Court of Cook County, I had an unusual opportunity to observe the reaction to Miller's writings. The judge, the son and brother of distinguished rabbis, is a person free from the "normal" vices of smoking, drinking and philandering. He is a man of culture, who dislikes police state methods and is dubious about censorship. Yet his first reaction to *Tropic of Cancer* was of shock and disgust (he mentioned that a member of his family had thrown the book to the floor in anger); had he yielded to his initial impulse, he would have declared the book obscene. But he was fairminded enough to hear the case through, to listen to all of the witnesses, to read the literary judgments *in toto*, to study the various legal precedents, and to return to the book again and again; he read it three or four times. In the end, he had relatively little difficulty in writing an historic opinion, finding the book to be constitutionally protected, and restraining all police interference with it.

Opposing counsel, the police officials, the witnesses against the book, and large segments of the population of the Chicago area had instantaneous reactions against the book and its author, and nothing could budge them, not even the very remarkable opinion of a highly respected judge.

For the police officers, there was no particular problem. All that they had to do was to read the famous prose ode to Tania on the top of page 5 of the paper-

back edition, observe the four-letter words and the impure images in it, and, instantaneously, they knew that the book was obscene. They did not have to read more of it; they did not have to consult the lawyers for their communities; all they had to do was to seize copies of the book and threaten or cajole its vendors to cease selling it. Some of the more cautious chiefs read a few pages; none read the entire book. One or two, who may not have been unduly concerned, on afterthought, about the sale of the hard-cover edition to adults, were worried about the perusal of the paperback by children.

The corporation attorneys of the cities and villages involved in the suit were slightly more sophisticated than the police officers. It was clear that they, too, had reached their conclusion about the book's obscenity after a spot check of the contents; but in preparation for the trial, they read through it, not for understanding, as Francis Bacon suggested, but for contradiction. They thought the book was obscene because it had no plot or continuity, and because Henry Miller was a bad character, often married and divorced and never faithful to the spouse of the moment. They tended to dismiss the literary critics and authors who praised Miller and his book as interested parties. "All writers gang up against the police and the public," they said, largely in those words.

The witnesses for the police—and, significantly, they were Protestant and Jewish as well as Catholic—professed to judge the book in its entirety—it was bad for the kids, and immoral; it appealed to prurient interest; besides, it had no literary value; it was unrelieved smut. Cornered on cross-examination, they admitted that the book dealt with matters other than sex—art, music, literature, philosophy, food, much besides; they conceded that it might be a faithful pic-

ture of a particular group of literary and artistic vagabonds in the Paris of the 1930's, that it might not harm the "sophisticates." What emerged from all the witnesses, despite any efforts at coyness on their part, was a distaste for sex in any unbridled form. It simply was not right for a writer to create an atmosphere in which his characters utilized all organs of their bodies and were "unliterary" in their descriptions of what they did. It was as simple as the difference between the draped and undraped, the direct and the indirect approach.

Men and women who use their bodies completely and do not hesitate in daily life to express themselves frankly seem to draw the line between literature and life. Literature, to them like a form of religion, must be sacred; the profane must be excluded from it. This is the antithesis of all that Henry Miller has always believed and practiced. Fortunately, the highest courts, but not the lower ones, and not some segments of the public, have caught up with Miller, Lawrence, Joyce and other great pioneers. As Bernard Shaw once observed, for all we know the grandchildren of his generation might read such works as a matter of course. Henry Miller is making this possible.

The meaning of Miller goes beyond the obscenity cases and controversies in which his books are involved. This can best be epitomized in personal form.

Miller was always conscious that I, like all busy men, had to conserve my energies. He did not want me to take on any unnecessary burdens. But he insisted that, regardless of how much or how little time I had at my disposal, I had to read Jacob Wasserman's trilogy on the Maurizius Case; that as a lawyer, a citizen and, above all, a human being, it would enlarge my understanding of justice in its ultimate sense. I did read Miller's magnificent sixty-four page review of the

three novels and carried away from it a grasp of the philosophical roots of Miller's antipathy for the restraints of society. I think that Miller's viewpoint is summed up in one of the early paragraphs of his essay, where he says about the Wasserman work: "The theme of the story is not alone the inadequacy of human justice, but the impossibility of ever attaining it. All the characters testify to this, in their own way, even that 'Pillar of Justice,' Herr Von Andergast himself. Justice, it appears, is merely a pretext for inflicting cruelty upon the weaker one. Justice, divorced from love, becomes revenge."

To him the Maurizius Case is the tragedy of every man. Our cruel penology is only one aspect of the world catastrophe which encompasses destruction in every form:

And though you try to tell yourself that you acted strictly according to the rules, and in the name of Justice, you know in your heart that you are guilty. Your house crumbles and you with it. You have pardoned the enemy meanwhile, but it is too late. It is not a man who walks out of the prison but a living corpse. Now you are the enemy, but there is no one to pardon you, no one of whom to ask forgiveness. You mull over the crime to discover how it originated but you get nowhere. The seed is in every household, in every breast. The society you fought to maintain now looms before you as one huge suppurating chancre.

This, then, is the context in which we must contemplate the law and Henry Miller.

## DRACONIAN POSTSCRIPT

*Henry Miller*

AFTER I had written the two *Tropics* and *Black Spring* I conceived the idea of writing a very small book to be called *Draco and the Ecliptic*; in one of the early Paris publications, so convinced was I of doing it, that I announced it as forthcoming in the near future. That was almost thirty years ago. Today this projected work remains as tenuous in my mind as when it was conceived.

I had no idea at the time, of course, that I would give birth to three huge volumes entitled *The Rosy Crucifixion*. I thought only to add a second volume to *Tropic of Capricorn*, in which a condensed version of what is now incorporated in *The Rosy Crucifixion* would be given. That is why I gave the sub-title—"On the Ovarian Trolley"—to *Capricorn*. I meant this first volume to be a prelude to the real *Capricorn*. In the years which elapsed before beginning *The Rosy Crucifixion* so many things happened—the sojourn in Greece, the war, the "air-conditioned nightmare" trip around America and so on—that I completely lost sight of my original idea.

Always in the back of my head was the thought that, as I progressed with "the story of my misfortunes," the purpose and meaning of my life's work would become more apparent to me. In *Draco and the Ecliptic* I

planned to give the hidden, quintessential story behind my story—in other words, its esoteric significance. (The German in me, no doubt.) And now, here I am part way through the second half of *Nexus*, which winds up the trilogy, and I am almost as much in the dark as at the beginning. If pressed, if asked the right questions, I can of course make pertinent observations about my “autobiographical romances,” as I have slyly dubbed these books. I may even fool myself into believing I know what it is all about.

With the passage of time, however, I notice that I am growing more indifferent about providing a clue or key to my work. I might even go further and say that I grow happier in my state of un-knowing. My great desire, before I had ever so much as written a line, was simply to become a writer. There was a double thought back of this imperious urge, namely, to be able to write as I pleased and to live the life of a writer. Then I naively thought that to be a writer was to find freedom. I never dreamed that in doing as I wished I would be spinning a web which would ensnare me. In the act of liberating myself I found to my dismay that I was putting myself at the mercy of the world.

How explain what I mean?

The reader may remember that when I quit the employ of the telegraph company I vowed I would never again work for any one. I would be “my own master absolute,” as Whitman proclaimed. So I thought. Today it seems to me that I am at the beck and call of every Tom, Dick and Harry. The more effective my writing, the more far-reaching it becomes, the deeper I am involved. Each new book becomes more difficult to write—for the simple reason that I have less and less opportunity to live my own life. I consider myself fortunate now when I find that I have a whole day to myself, a day in which I may

write. Usually I am pushing myself to make time so that I may put in an hour or two at my desk. The greater part of the day is taken up by the thousand and one imbeciles who, for a variety of reasons and in a thousand devious ways, intrude upon my privacy. Thus I who thought to find freedom have become the slave of everyman and must wage a heroic struggle day in and day out merely to write.

One result of this peculiar situation—not unique with me, I realize—is that I grow less and less concerned about achieving my original aims. More and more I live from day to day, hour to hour. What I fail to accomplish in this life I may in the next, I tell myself. I make little or no plans for the future. I do what I can each day and let the future take care of itself. (Not a bad idea, when you think of it.) I even question whether I would enjoy that ideal life of a writer I once dreamed of, assuming it were possible. What could be better for me than what is? “It,” as I often say, knows better than I what is good for me or not. What was intended for me to learn by taking up the pen has already been learned, if not thoroughly accepted. I wanted to be able to write, I said. Well, *I am able*. Does it matter so much that I write or don’t write? As for the life of a writer, am I not in it with two feet? That it is something other than I originally thought, what matter?

A wan smile flits across my face as I write these words. I cannot help but think of the nights when, as an earnest young man, I prayed each night with all my soul for the blessed gifts which have been bestowed upon me. My prayers were answered, after all. And I should be grateful, should I not? Unfortunately, like the rest of human kind, I too am restless and dissatisfied with my lot. So, what now, little man?

Here I must digress to speak of that little and most

mysterious word—"happen." All my life, it would seem, things have "happened" to me. On sober retrospection I am led to say that the active me was most often dormant. Certainly I did act, now and then. Generally at the last moment, when it was either do or die. Reading my books, people get the idea that I have knocked about a good deal. It would be more true to say that I was knocked about. When things went wrong, as they most often did, I was inclined to blame others, blame society, for the sad state of affairs in which I found myself. Then one day, in the Villa Seurat (circa 1935 or '36), I woke up to the fact that I had only myself to blame for all the ills that had befallen me. The truth of this conviction has never deserted me. If a moment ago I bemoaned my fate I am aware nevertheless that it is the result of my own doings. One spins his own web, no mistake about it.

*The Rosy Crucifixion*, the very title, I mean, conveys this thought. It also conveys, I must quickly add, the idea of acceptance. At the time I formulated this overall title for the trilogy (*Sexus*, *Plexus*, *Nexus*) I was not fully aware of all its sad implications. I had envisaged the sacrifice of the ego, with the attendant discovery of the true creator, but I had not foreseen the sacrifices demanded by society. I was prepared to die the kind of death which every creative individual is familiar with, but I was not prepared to be eaten piecemeal by the vultures who live vicariously. I never realized that in my efforts to free myself I was providing my fellow men with another specimen of scapegoat. How often have I said—without effect, alas—that I am not out to save the world? Perhaps there was a time when I did entertain the notion that my words might help remedy some of the ills which affect the world. But that day is long since past. Not that I believe things are hopeless. Far from it. It's that

problems, whether individual, national or universal, have come to assume a different aspect in my eyes. I have come to regard enlightenment as more important than salvation. Or perhaps better still, that salvation must be construed in terms of enlightenment.

When I think now of how important, how urgent, it once was to recount my sorrows and struggles, my dreams and despair, my hopes and frustrations, I sense that I have become quite another person than the writer who was thus obsessed. Undoubtedly it *was* of paramount importance for me to give full expression to these things. It was a purge, if nothing else, which I administered to myself. In the process I may inadvertently have aided others to liberate themselves. But that this is the writer's ultimate aim I am not at all certain. I am more and more inclined to think that simply to write is goal enough.

Whither now, asks the insoluble fish. If I knew I would have no need to write another word. One keeps searching and seeking, ever deeper inward. And in the back of one's head lies the tormenting thought, or the comforting one, if one can reconcile himself to it, that perhaps there is no end to this seeking and searching, that even if one turned oneself inside out there would still be more to reveal, more to discover.

I am always being asked what I plan to do after I have completed the grand project, and my answer usually is—"write nonsense" or "write books for children." I mean it sincerely when I answer thus. But how do I know, how *can* I know, what I shall do next? The further along one gets the more appeal there is in the unexpected. Most of us imagine that we are traveling in a straight line, whereas the truth is that we are moving in circles. We change direction almost without thinking. Headed for Mexico, we land in China. (And, like as not, without the slightest loss of face.) The

ambitious ones set out to storm the world, only to end up like so many dead leaves scattered by the wind. Something similar happens to the writer also. He sets out to tell a story, and when he has told it he is surprised that it is he who has been told a story. By whom? All he can say is that the act of writing makes of him a teller and a listener at the same time. Which means, in my mind at least, that we live and move and have our being in utter, absolute mystery.

If these conundrums are known to such humble creatures as writers, they are even better known to saints and wise men. It is no oddity that these latter seldom bother to put thought to paper, that they eschew all preaching, that they are reluctant to give counsel, and that when they do heal it is in spite of themselves. Their way is also the way of art, only the medium is life itself. How much more effective is their way of communicating with the world! Mute, withdrawn, often unknown, they affect us immeasurably.

I have sounded this theme a number of times. I will speak no more of it now except to add that if the pursuit of art has led me anywhere it is to this exciting and perplexing point, this border line where art and life meet. Possibly it explains why my work is of such a paradoxical nature. I am like one who has found God but not yet learned to give himself entirely to Him. Or, what is worse, who prefers to do this in his own way rather than in God's way.

What more is there to say? Here, if there be a dilemma, is *my* dilemma. God help me!

Pacific Palisades

July 25, 1962

## MAJOR BOOKS BY HENRY MILLER

1934 *Tropic of Cancer*. Obelisk Press, Paris.

1936 *Black Spring*. Obelisk Press, Paris.

1938 *Max and the White Phagocytes*. Obelisk Press, Paris.

1939 *Tropic of Capricorn*. Obelisk Press, Paris.

1939 *The Cosmological Eye*. New Directions, New York.

1939-1943 *Hamlet* (with Michael Fraenkel). 2 vols. Carrefour, Paris and New York.

1941 *The Colossus of Maroussi*. Colt Press, San Francisco.

1941 *The Wisdom of the Heart*. New Directions, New York.

1944 *Sunday After the War*. New Directions, New York.

1945 *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*. New Directions, New York.

1947 *Remember to Remember*. New Directions, New York.

1949 *Sexus* (Book I of *The Rosy Crucifixion*). Obelisk Press, Paris.

1952 *The Books in My Life*. New Directions, New York.

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1957 *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*. New Directions, New York.

1960 *Nexus*, Vol. I (Book III of *The Rosy Crucifixion*). Obelisk Press, Paris.

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1961 *Tropic of Cancer*. Grove Press, New York.

1962 *Watercolors, Drawings and His Essay "The Angel Is My Watermark!"* Harry N. Abrams, New York.

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1963 *Lawrence Durrell and Henry Miller: A Private Correspondence* (ed. by George Wickes). E. P. Dutton & Co., New York, and Faber and Faber, London.

1963 *Black Spring*. Grove Press, New York.



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